

art & ideas 3

# variant

autumn 1987



KULTURKRIT

# CONTENTS

Editorial Quotes/The Spirit of Resistance	4
Action/Time/Vision...news in time-based media	5
'101 Things To Do With Time' by Alan Robertson ...a survey of time-based work in Scotland up until May'87	6
'The Cabinet of Stuart McKenzie' by Peter Kravitz	10
Exhibition Notices: 'Sites/Positions', 'Discarded Sculptures'	12
'Notes Originating On Seeing Ian Hamilton Finlay's 'Talismans and Signifiers' by Murdo McDonald	13
'The National Artists Association' by Roland Miller	14
'Why Plagiarism?' by Bob Jones	15
'Is There Such a Thing as a Working Class Aesthetic?' notes by Stefan Szczelkun	17
'White Trash: Art In Ruins' by Malcolm Dickson	18
Artist's Page: Adam Geary	20
'A Scottish Story' by Karen Eliot	21
Denis Masi interviewed	25
'Redundant Aesthetics and The Cult of Failure' by Malcolm Dickson	29
Artist's Page: Peter Thomson	30
'The Great Divide and The Vigorous Imagination' by David O'Vary	32
'What Is Political Art?' Notice	35

*Contributors are unpaid.*

# Variant

Variant aims to:

document and encourage new forms of artistic activity in Scotland.

discuss art in a social and political context,

encourage debate on creative issues,

serve as a platform for EventSpace, an organisation aimed at promoting time-based media and experimental approaches.

Variant welcomes contributions such as articles, polemical writing and other items. It is keen to encourage artists to give critical evaluation of other artists' work, for notices of forthcoming exhibitions and collaborative projects. Possible sources for articles for Variant's artist pages and suggestions for areas to be covered are invited. As much advance publicity and photographs are needed prior to any event for it to be covered adequately. Unsolicited material cannot be guaranteed publication, though the editor will endeavour to reply to all items of correspondence. An SAE should be included for return of material and photographs.

Subsidised by anonymous sponsors, advertisements and pre-publication subscriptions. Variant gratefully acknowledges these individuals.

All material © Variant and the authors.

Edited and designed by Malcolm Dickson.

Typeset and printed by Clydeside Press. 041-552 5519.

Logo: Madalene MacGregor.

Variant:

76 Carlisle Street,  
Glasgow G21 1EF.

*Front Cover:* 'Our Wonderful Culture: Art In Ruins'. The Crypt, Bloomsbury, London 1985 (see article 'White Trash: Art In Ruins').

*Back Cover:* The raising of the Red Flag in George Square, Glasgow 1919.

## EDITORIAL QUOTES

"...I think much current art is repressive in spite of innovative crossover techniques and manifold availabilities. In Scotland there is a phrase - *CAULD KALE HET AGAIN* - cold soup hot again. Inappropriate mediation 'neuters' art. In this politically conservative decade what's happened to art as political critique? Where's the bite, stomach and teeth?"

Alistair MacLennan interviewed in *Performance Magazine* No. 47 1987.

"...if works of art are to have any meaning for us, their meaning will persist not because of narrative descriptions about them or even about their intentions, but because there persists a determined critical aspect to the manner in which they are perceived as integral to the fabric of our social context."

Robert C. Morgan 'Pluralism as Accommodation of Style' in *Real Life Magazine*, Number 16.

"In cultural politics today, a basic opposition exists between a postmodernism which seeks to deconstruct modernism and resist the status quo and a postmodernism which repudiates the former to celebrate the latter: a postmodernism of resistance and a postmodernism of reaction... A postmodernism of resistance, then, arises as a counter-practice not only to the official culture of modernism but also to the 'false normativity' of a reactionary postmodernism. In opposition (but not only in opposition), a resistant postmodernism is concerned with a critical deconstruction of tradition, not an instrumental pastiche of pop- or pseudo-historical forms, with a critique of origins, not a return to them. In short, it seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations."

Hal Foster, preface to 'Postmodern Culture', 1983.

"Artists working in new and experimental ways articulate a challenge to prevailing values and formal restrictions to which there will always be some kind of negative response. It is important to use the gap which produces this response to examine the distance between art and its public, to make decisions about the establishment of a language which enables some kind of real communication develop, and to begin a serious questioning of how far 'experimental' art is inherently inaccessible, and whether this is not in fact an important factor in its ability to suggest this new important factor in its ability to suggest new directions, and ultimately how far that area of tension contains the real potential for social change."

Chrissie Iles, catalogue essay to 'Confrontations' exhibition, 1987.

"(the ruling classes') Big Voices boom to a military cadence from the High Podium in the centre of the auditorium and all but drown out the myriad little voices of the oppressed who struggle to sing their own songs above the din. Enraptured by the power and harmony of the Big Voices and their great high-tech megaphones, the masses listen attentively to the Siren songs of industrial and, now, post-industrial culture. If the little voices could just get their message out to enough people, these oppositional culture producers believe, the false harmony of the Big Voices would crack and their imposing cultural machinery would topple like a facade on the set of some B-grade Hollywood epic, baring a vicious, rapacious structural reality. With the grand illusion revealed, the hordes would begin to shout not for a new illusion but a better reality."

Marc Wortman, reviewing 'Cultures in Contention', *Telos Journal*.

## THE SPIRIT OF RESISTANCE

THE PURPOSE OF a magazine attempting to give a critical profile to contemporary art practice in Scotland is a challenging venture, but a necessary one which inevitably comes up against establishment mediocrity and artists' acquiescence in the commercialisation of creativity. Given the highly inflated position of 'Scottish Culture' (seen from abroad) it seems no surprise that the glamour that accompanies this - through the injection of thousands by multinational capitalist companies like Shell into such shows as the 'Vigorous Imagination' - has anaesthetised much.

Despite the meteoric rise to fame of some young Scottish artists and their older impressarios, the necessary critical import has not occurred. No attempt has been made through establishment voices to scrutinise the forms that this new art takes, no intelligible or convincing case has been heard as to why some artists seem very significant at the time of their public profile beyond their malleability with the art market.

Might it not be more responsible to assess the situation on the grounds that Scotland might now be asserting its own artistic movements and traditions rather than the ridiculously premature claims about a 'new Scottish Renaissance' in the visual arts. What is even more questionable is that these claims are being made by those establishment voices who are at the same time claiming responsibility for the invention of it, and by tired critics and culture market-men from South of the Border who see Scotland as an untapped source of profit in the culture, tourist and business sector - an area of interest only to those whose image can benefit. Using the word 'hype' to describe the situation of the visual arts in Scotland is a modest understatement. It would be laughable if it weren't for the fact that this is the way history gets written. Future historians will write about present art through that which has gained importance because of the weight of the 'claims' made by the voices of authority, the critics and impressarios, and through that which features in the dealers' collections.

When critical voices have been raised, as they were in the *Edinburgh Review* last August against the 'New Image' category and 'painting' as a passive medium, the naive response of the establishment has been to write off the critique as politically provocative,

E  
D  
I  
T  
O  
R  
I  
A  
L

unrealistic, or to accuse the individuals who take the dominant assumptions to task of 'sour grapes' or as advocating a 'Cult of Failure' (Neil Ascherson in the Observer). Though New Image rode the crest of a wave by putting Glasgow on the map, it was a reductionist strategy which was medium-specific which has created the solid figure of the Glasgow Painter, it has legitimised furthermore the power of the museum as the mediator of Art, has further alienated painting practice from the public in Scotland, and enforces and further mystifies the political structure of a small, but powerful Scottish art world. The whole situation has led to certain critics and curators assuming more importance than the artists. It has also denied the importance of other artforms (which might not be gallery-based) or in time-based mediums which are more adept at dealing with new areas and conditions of experience in the present.

Of course, critics, art historians and curators all have their part to play if they are enlightened enough in helping to explain or suggesting the meaning of art works, what significance they have in a certain period of time, and in exhibiting a wide range of artistic

practices. But job description does not validate a certain evaluation. Since Variant is dealing broadly with the visual arts, it supports collective undertakings in this area and in artists initiating projects and making their own demands. Being in a position of power doesn't necessarily make your opinions more correct or even convincing, being able to sell art for inflated prices to an elite sector of the population doesn't mean it is any more historically pertinent, and being unemployed doesn't make your voice redundant or less perceptive, even if you are also Scottish, working class and call yourself an 'artist'.

Again those in power are sharpening up their act as the issue of a Scottish Assembly is back on the agenda. It is up to cultural workers, activists in local authority and community organisations, and those autonomous groups based in specific areas to start discussing self-determination outwith its old Labourist and Nationalist definitions. The option now is to look at the possibility of non-parliamentary based organisation in Scotland with devolved republics around the different regions, and art and culture is

as well placed as political analysis in throwing up questions and suggesting new possibilities. At a practical level, the purpose of a magazine like Variant is to encourage debate and thought around some of these issues as the 'real life' of politics becomes based more on illusion and ineffectuality. It would be encouraging to see the formation of artists groups across the whole spectrum of culture which could meet through the common need to discuss issues affecting their activity and the interests of people in Scotland. In this respect, one or two of the larger 'public' galleries in Scotland might be taken out of their narrow role in exhibiting art and in becoming potential art laboratories, public spaces of creative activity, independent from the control of governmental bodies. This vision might afford a balance between international perspectives with indigenous sensibilities and set within a broader and flexible political and social vision. It is across these levels that Variant will operate: by the identification of Culture as that activity which embodies *self-determination* and preservation of identity and social life, of *self-control* of the individual and social group.

## ACTION/TIME/VISION

*continued on page 9*

THE PAST FEW months have seen a refreshing outburst of artistic activity around the areas of time-based media especially video art, and in installation work. In the context of 'Scottish Art', these areas still remain invisible, the activities themselves are not catered for through existing galleries (with the exception of one or two), there is no money set aside by the Scottish Arts Council to fund this area, and there is no critical criteria with which to carry weight to the activity... Two meetings have so far occurred between the Scottish Arts Council and representatives of Scottish galleries and some practitioners in the area of 'time-based' work. Such meetings have arisen from the determined efforts by some individuals and organisations to promote new work and by a very few galleries programming it. The general consensus expressed at these meetings has been that 'more should be done within this area but at present too much confusion surrounded the practicalities of promoting this area'. Much of the confusion lies, perhaps, in institutional perceptions of canvas-bound art and that time-based work is a sideline at best, a diversion at worst. The Scottish Arts Council, however, has responded positively in recognising that some sort of provision is needed. Suggestions so far have been to establish a 'special fund' on an annual basis somewhere in the region of £20,000 which artists and organisations can tap into. This column will report all developments... Papers presented at these meetings have come from Transmission, Steve Partridge of Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee, from George Wylie and from EventSpace, a new organisational agency set-up to promote experimental and issue-related areas...see EventSpace Policy Document this issue and notice of 'Sites/Positions', an exhibition of site-specific installation works Glasgow planned for the new year... The Scottish Art Council has also been involved in a video panel to look specifically at video art

production in Scotland: papers which are of use to interested individuals are available from EventSpace, these being 'On Production' by Steven Partridge, 'On Practice' by Douglas Aubrey, and a survey of time-based work in Scotland by Alan Robertson (see his article '101 Things to do with Time' in this issue).

The National Review of Live Art is being held at Riverside Studios in London from October 8th-11th and this year includes several Scots-based artists: Karen Strang will be presenting a slide installation called 'Seduction/Saturation', Douglas Gordon/Euan Sutherland/Craig Richardson, still students in the Environmental Art course at Glasgow School of Art, will be collaborating on an installation called 'Tradition: debilitation'.

Versions of these works will be at Glasgow's Third Eye Centre; Strang - 28th-29th October, Gordon/Sutherland/Richardson - 21st-24th October. This is the Review's 7th year, now moved from its original base at the Midland Group in Nottingham, where it was co-ordinated by Nikki Millican, now Performance Art Officer, at the Third Eye Centre and still operating this important event. The purpose of the Review is to combine new and unsubsidised work with higher profile commissioned work, (this year including Alistair MacLennan and Mona Hatoum, who will also be at the Third Eye Centre; see advertisement this issue). As Steve Rogers put it in the recent issue of Performance Magazine: "It is still the only major attempt made in this country to seek out new performance artists and intervene in the usual process of artists going ignored for years until either they stop making performances in favour of some more 'acceptable' way of working or, rarely, hang on with ferocious tenacity and join Britain's meagre ranks of 'established' performance artists". Such an event is a round the year job and Millican hopes to



# 101 THINGS to do with TIME

THE EMERGENCE of time-based work in Scotland has come about through a surprisingly rapid chain of events over the past twelve months. Out of a series of initiatives from galleries, colleges, individuals and the Scottish Arts Council, there has been a perceptible rise in awareness, exposure and interest in artist's video work across the country. Most evident in these initiatives have been the efforts of Stephen Partridge (see last issue) who works at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee. There has been set up a department that caters not only for students from all parts of the college but also for artists, whether they be funded or unfunded, who are currently practicing in the areas of video installation and to some extent performance. In allowing access to professional facilities 'The Television Workshop' has consequently given artists the ability to not only tackle both technology and ideas in a way never before available, but also to come up with results that are in the main aesthetically and technically advanced.

Returning to the broader issue of time-based work in Scotland, the most significant event in its evolution can be seen as the 'Glasgow Events Space #1' show at the city's Transmission Gallery in February last year. This seminal show brought together a whole range of new areas and ways of working - video installations, performance, multi-screen film work, and various hybrids of each - to an art audience still somewhat in the grip of the New Image stylists. For such a small gallery as Transmission to instigate such a large scale project was foolhardy but successful. Being an artist-run space without the financial back-up, staff and resources of other venues like the Third Eye Centre for instance, there were errors and mistakes, miscalculations and (near) disasters. But the strength of the show

would inevitably rest on the work and the audience, and both came together in a way no one had predicted. The only bemused people were the Scottish Press who were unsure whether to send a film critic, a television critic or an art critic, and in the end sent no one. Of the journalists who did come however, one did venture the question "How many frames are there in a piece of video art?" and "How could it be art when it's shown on televisions?". Very serious questions indeed, I'm sure you will agree.

In answer to that, it seems fair to say that in the past, any artistic application of technology has always appeared cosmetic and of very dubious merit, being employed by 'designers' and 'technicians' with all the creative flair of cold porridge. Even the use of known artists can at times prove disappointing, take for example the BBC's series 'Painting with Light'. Here we see 'famous' painters create 'unique' works of 'art' using the Quantel 'Paintbox', only to be instantly confronted with the classic problem of adapting a medium of unique innovatory potential to their traditional, stylistic and market-orientated treadmills.

However with 'Glasgow Events Space #1' and subsequent shows, it should be clear to anyone who has seen such work that there are many more interesting ways of using television and its technology than to sit down and watch one (at a time); you can stack them up, spread them about, play the same thing over 28 of them, adjust the colour levels, group them in blocks of four, amplify your voice through one, wrap them round with rope, anything to do with images, so long as they don't stand still. It seems to be a case of people alienating the viewing of art from their own experience (possibly a joint symptom of Government controlled collective amnesia and the neo-mystical

distractions of certain contemporary painters); of an inability to connect images, ideas and environment; of not even appreciating their own awareness and responses to the audio visual language that has now replaced television's traditional film language. It is this that assaults us day after day in advertising, pop videos, quiz and game shows, light entertainment and even news and current affairs. It is principally from within such a context that time-based work draws its references in order to remain contemporary and viable. It is a deliberate ploy by artists to communicate outside of or undermine these formal constraints, in the hope of opening out the viewer's understanding of the devices, techniques and disguises that make up the television form. Because of the breadth and involvement of these issues, artists working within time-based areas tend to produce reams of information and details to support their stances, for it has always been a constant necessity for them to justify, not merely explain, their way of working.

Since the 'Glasgow Events Space #1' show, video installation work has appeared in the McLellan Galleries and the Royal Scottish Academy with work made by myself and Douglas Aubrey under the name Pictorial Heroes, consisting of an ever-increasing number of television sets. One of the unique features about these pieces was their location within traditional art exhibitions, set loud and proud amongst the paint, canvas, wood and metal. It is thanks to the foresight and enthusiasm of George Wylie that these works were not only shown, but also that they were not hived off into some obscure ghetto of the gallery where they could not be easily found. It was reported that, during the showing at the RSA, after the initial surprise of seeing a collection of television sets



"proclaiming revolt in sound and vision" (Glasgow Herald), people would come back again on two or three occasions (partly to see if the atrocity was still there) partly to adapt themselves to appreciating the subtleties and effects of the work as it developed.

Transmission itself has continued on its frontier stance by hosting not only the first Stuart Brisley performance in five years, but also the imaginatively titled '*Glasgow Events Space #2*' in October 1986. The show this time had a heavier live art emphasis, featuring work by the internationally recognised artists Richard Layzell and Charlie Hooker, as well as two evenings of 8mm and 16mm film work. There was also a selection of video work from West Germany, but most of this was so awful that no one could bear watching it for long.

Richard Layzell has a reputation for making audiences feel uncomfortable from watching his work, this is never through any physical or verbal intimidation, rather it's the way he handles the complexities of the narratives he weaves about human situations. At Transmission he presented the audience with a work in which he played himself, a sculptor called Victor, a gallery owner, a film maker, a female 'performance artiste' and a sculpture called 'Delta' (a

construction of two chairs and a broom from behind which he spoke). It was an entertaining and enthralling piece of work, and miles away from the screaming, naked, mud bathing images of performance art that came out of the seventies. It was closer to theatre in the Jack Klaff/Stephen Berkoff sense, yet possessed an angularity and intensity of invention that made it art, without any of its devaluing connotations. Charlie Hooker on the other hand created a wholly different work in the same space, with its roots more in dance and music. The performance featured, as well as Hooker, three participants beating sticks, two rotating ghetto-blasters suspended by elastic from the ceiling, and an imaginative use of lumious strips stuck to the wall and floor. Entitled '*White Lining*', it was a mesmeric and rhythmical choreography of motion, sound and light lasting a mere ten minutes; yet in that time the viewer was presented with some extraordinary images and drawn through intense ritualistic emotions that urged one to participate. The subtle flashes of light from bulbs attached to the beater's sticks, the rotating lights on the ends of the ghetto-blasters and Hooker's use of a camera flash unit, combined to create a unique interplay of audio and visual invention.

Both the Layzell and Hooker

performances can be seen as dynamic and co-ordinated events, each lasting a determined length of time. Layzell's narrative had a structured route to its conclusion, although it was not a conclusion in the conventional sense, yet was the result of a series of inter-connecting tableaux. With '*White Lining*', Charlie Hooker had constructed a finely balanced series of movements and actions that created a unique poetry through light, motion and time. These approaches contrast sharply with Stuart Brisley's '*Red Army 2*', which was improvised over three days in Transmission, yet it still qualifies as performance art.

Brisley utilised the ancient tradition of retelling a story out of memory and experience, and extending this into the realm of myth. In connection with this approach, he employed a series of visual and sensory aids by painting slogans on the walls with a broom, breaking glass bottles, using a sewer inlet as an echo chamber, and letting off a fire extinguisher. The memory and experience this concerned was an image relayed to him by a friend - of the Red Army imprisoned in 1919 on the island of Sveaborg to which he and Brisley were travelling. It was this piece of history that became the springboard for the performance and the means of building layers of emotive questioning and imagery. There was no realistic conclusion to be

drawn from Brisley's words, it never seemed as if that was a necessary part of his task, there was only the sense of a shared understanding and bizarre feeling of loss once the event was over.

In all between thirty to forty people witnessed the work, which for an unpublicised and 'unofficial' happening, proves that there is a concern that is growing and an appetite that needs satisfying.

This then leads me to the 'Interference-experimental video' show at Dundee's Seagate Gallery. It was initiated by four students at Duncan of Jordanstone in conjunction with the gallery's exhibitions organiser Bob McGilvray. Of the six installations exhibited, three were by invited artists and three from the students themselves. Taking a number of lessons from the 'Glasgow Events Space #1' show, 'Interference' was based around a turnover of large scale installation works, an organiser or artist on hand to explain and discuss the work with the public, and a library of single screen work from the UK available to be viewed on request. One of the students, Mark McLean, had also taken the opportunity to select work by artists in Europe which was also available, and while he was there showed tapes at various galleries of work made in Scotland.

The show opened with 'Smile' by Steve Littman, which was both a particularly didactic piece and a fire risk at the same time. On first appearance the environment looked like a segment of Murdoch's Wapping plant had been dropped into the gallery, with newspapers and photographs scattered across the floor and half the space cordoned off behind barbed wire. This initial interpretation soon gave way to a more personal and individual assessment. Although it did address issues of news, levels of truth, information, media stereotypes and technology, the basic issue was an investigation into why we accept so much of what others say throughout our lives, be they parents, teachers, journalists, politicians or artists even. In using nine monitors, four tape sources, as well as the barbed wire and newspapers, flickering lights and shelving full of assorted objects, I feel Littman lost the opportunity to convey any such succinct statement to those not accustomed to watching this type and scale of work. By virtue of the overloaded delivery, one had to endeavour to siphon off so much from the web of imagery and sound within this dense work, that the viewer soon became defeated in their efforts at translation.

It is a unique feature of video installation work that it is created in

front of you through time, and in this sense it is a very organic form of art. One has to observe the fact that everything is recorded on tape and goes from a definite beginning to an indefinite end, the best you could hope to capture in one visit is a mere snapshot in the work's evolution. This was the problem that confronted the next two installations, 'Waking Dream' by Sandra Christie and 'What Kind of Animal Are We?' by Alister McDonald. It was essential for these works that the tape sources ran in synchronization, any delay between them and the fragility of their visual construct would collapse. So throughout their showing the artists had to return to the back of the installation and re-set the relationship of the tapes at the end of each cycle.

When they were running the installations made for a more modest and calming experience compared to the battery of devices employed by Littman. However, the meaning behind these pieces appeared at the core to be rather hollow; although beautifully crafted and with excellent photography, the almost mystical and dream-like quality of both works avoided taking on directly what they obviously hoped they were addressing - evidently some sexual and ritualistic view of the human condition. There was undoubtedly something personal and specific involved in their making, but sadly it got lost somewhere in the translation to an iconography of insularity of uncertainty.

Pictorial Heroes were invited to exhibit in the show, for which we created a new work entitled 'The Great Divide'. This involved the interlacing of three separate narrative images over thirteen screens. The first was an act of urban vandalism to one of Glasgow's towering Citrack motorway surveillance cameras, the second a cut-up version of the Renault 25 advert (in which David starts his own business because John's with him, Ian's with him and he's got the backing), and the third was a continuous black and white surveillance shot of a motorway. This was directed at the increasing divisions in cultural, economic and social experience within Britain's ancient class system and the underlying tensions that exist, creating a massive source of potential conflict.

Proving that there is never any one way to make an installation, Chris Rowland's 'Shall We Dance?' was significant for its complete contrast. A pleasant and more entertaining than



demanding piece, it featured dancers on telly cut-out feet on the gallery floor and created a series of interesting contradictions between the space, the subject matter and the spectator. AS with his single screen work in the library, 'Wakey Wakey', he displays a concern for rhythm and timing within a minimalist video environment; an approach which on the one hand can appear shallow and cerebral, yet similarly can hold the viewer through its hypnotic simplicity.

It was the concept of environment that was explored more fully in 'For You, Mrs Kelly' by Zoe Redman. It was a very peculiar viewing experience involving a burnt door frame, Japanese screens, film loops, video, sand, a telephone and a black dress suspended from the ceiling. There was a mysterious event at the heart of the work, contained within this mesh of images, hinted experiences and strained voices seeping out of the telephone.

The work appeared built upon these clues, yet as the viewer strove to connect one linkage, it proved of little use in connecting the whole. This evidently appeared to be down to the fact that the work was designed for a performance and was shown here with that element missing. Without doubt the addition of a performer within the environment would have connected all the splintering facets that feature in the work, and have drawn the viewer into some concrete resolution of the issues on display.

Overall the 'Interference' show allowed the artists access to an excellent installation and performance space, and although the work was variable in its effect, the audiences were large and appreciative. The only severe problem was the unnecessarily rapid turnover of works and the duration of each showing; it is unthinkable that a sculptor would be expected to install and dismantle their show in the space of three days! Furthermore it is normal to say it was a 'brave' decision of the gallery to put on such a show, however I hope I've gone some way to show that in terms of audience interest, the increasing numbers of artists in Scotland now moving towards working in these areas, and the self-evident relevance of the medium itself, it is a very reactionary and blinkered venue that does not respond to such initiatives.

Bringing things right up to date (at least at the time of writing), in May Stephen Partridge presented an evening of single screen tapes at the Smith Art Gallery and Museum in Stirling. This one-off event was prompted having seen Partridge's article 'An Englishman Abroad' in the

catalogue for Channel 6, an annual video show held at various venues across London. Peter Russel who introduced the evening was also familiar with the Pictorial Heroes installation at the RSA and was obviously very pleased at the size of the turn-out for the evening's video event. Around forty people turned up to watch the three tapes by Partridge himself, which included his piece for the Channel 4 series 'Dadarama', and a selection of other work made by artists in Scotland. Ironically all the work shown, apart from Cavan Convery's excellent 'A Mere Simulation', was by ex-patriot Englishmen who have used 'The Television Workshop' in Dundee.

The problem with such events, as Partridge himself pointed out in the lively and diverse discussion afterwards, is the intensity of the viewing experience created by this type of work. Sadly it is often the case that it militates against any sympathetic appreciation of individual works to have them shown back-to-back in such manner. Understandably resulting from this, the main area of questioning concerned the credibility of such work as art, and the difficulties inherent in interpreting it as a new medium for artists. Furthermore, there was the proposition of equating the artist's own technical 'professionalism' to a marketable 'commercialism' and the role of the 'amateur' video artist. All in all it was a very successful event, and the audience went away somewhat wiser having demonstrated their open mindedness and interest in the area of time based work.

As the access to facilities has

increased and correspondingly the profile of time-based work heightened, then galleries and venues in Scotland can hopefully be considered among the more forward-looking and responsive in the UK. The call down South will soon falter when the London centralism collapses in on itself, and the mutual back-patting charade is seen for the incestuous conservatism it is. Then it will be time for a serious reappraisal of where the more relevant and interesting work is being made and shown.

© Alan Robertsan: May 1987

## EDITORS' NOTES

\* As reported in the Action/Time/Vision column, it is only very recently that the Scottish Arts Council have recognised 'time-based work' to be an area for development, due to increased participation in its forms. The author in his introduction identifies video as the time-based medium, and in this respect his reference to Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and the efforts of Steve Partridge to develop the video department are justified. However, access to this technology is only open to students and those who have the finance to do so, despite the S.A.C. video awards. Because Scottish art schools have not included video or other extended practices into their curricula until very recently (Video at D.J.C.A., Environmental Art at G.S.A.), there is no critical or practical assistance to the medium, which means that the video department at D.J.C.A. might be perceived as being a finishing

school for English students already well-versed in the technology. D.J.C.A. is light years ahead of other art schools in respect to incorporating video into the general Fine Art curriculum, assessed in terms equal to more traditional practices such as painting or sculpture.

\*\* Despite being a fairly erratic package (with bad tape copies, lack of coherence between works, and most of the tapes coming from artists who were not German!) 'Video Art in the FDR' was witnessed by a relatively 'large' audience. Interestingly, the people who had most patience to watch the tapes, sometimes for up to a couple of hours, were neither Glasgow artists nor video artists, but unemployed individuals associated with some community centres around Glasgow, in particular Maryhill. There were a few works which saved this package from ending up in Transmission's dustbin, these being tapes by Marcel Odenbach, Ulrike Rosenbach, and the compilation from Berlin multi-media artists' Gruppe Notorsche ("video is rearmament" said one viewer).

\*\*\* Another minor point of contention with the author's evaluation; as the one who was responsible for much of this performances' organisation, it was a publicised and – as far as I understand it – an official event. Photocopies don't equal glossy publicity, however, even when it involves the reputation and credibility of an artist like Stuart Brisley.



Contact prints of Steve Littman's video installation 'Smile' at Seagate Gallery, Dundee 1987.

continued from page 5

bring the whole event to Scotland next year, thereafter the Review becoming a Biennial. Nikki Millican can be contacted at the Third Eye Centre on 041-332 7521.

Also at the Nat. Review are Pictorial Heroes, Scotland's urban video guerrilla outfit, and will be presenting this installation work 'The Great Divide' at the Third Eye Centre. They are also making a powerful presence with their 15 monitor (6 input) installation at the stuffy sounding Society of Scottish Artist and the even the stuffier sounding Royal Scottish Academy (until Oct. 17th). This work continues their themes of inner-city collapse, surveillance over the individual and increasing social divisions. Their single screen work 'Sniper' is at the Smith Art Gallery and Museum as part of the Smith Biennial. This work hints at armed reprisals to the State, using staged sequences of a red-shirted provocateur in

the midst of urban unrest, collaged news reports of the raid by the Special Branch on BBC Scotland (when they made the video). The work is strong and uncompromising and surprisingly, though well deserved, won the second prize at the Biennial (£2,000). The tension caused by placing such video works in the context of large group shows mostly comprising of paintings raises the questions: are these institutions too conservative to subvert, are Scottish curators and critics enlightened enough to 'appreciate' the nature of these works? Whatever, memory, word of mouth and the odd review in a newspaper is not enough to give certain video works credit. ...The 1987 Visual Artists Bursaries are now open for application. Application forms and further information from Fiona McIver, at the Scottish Arts Council, 19 Charlotte Square, Edinburgh. 031-226 6051. Three bursaries are available at up to £1,000 each...





Excavations from excrement.

How our increased hygiene conceals elements of the Middle Ages which are present around us.

The artist's job of opening a door and creating a whole world, as if unearthed.

\*

*In the studio:* copies of *Life* magazine from the last war. The sort that display photos of heaped bodies crushing each other, next to adverts for hair-cream or anti-dandruff shampoo. A set of anthropological figures of people in outback and desert. Chaim Soutine catalogue. Dick Gaughan album cover. Peter Hujar's photographs of catacombs in Italy.

AH, SO IT'S THE FISH JOHN WEST REJECTS.

*A question:* why do people look on the floor of an artist's studio for 'clues' as to the 'meaning' of his paintings? Do we look in the garbage-cans of philosophers?

\*

Some details, though.

Born 1959 in Newport-on-Tay, Fife. Worked for a while before going to Edinburgh College of Art.

Decided against postgraduate – the institution had just got too much.

Grew up in Glenrothes newtown, next to completely rural Fife.

Not city, not suburb. Describe it for the moment as an isolated anywhere. Father worked in Africa for some years, then as a gamekeeper back in Scotland, although not presently employed.

\*

Unlike Anselm Kiefer, his experience is not the barren remains after the war, not the moral and physical bankruptcy after the bombing. Stuart McKenzie has people with no landscape where Kiefer has a landscape with no people. He thereby introduces the human component in a new way, going beyond the stage of getting rid of people. The return of people, but not as the straightforward figuration which supplies illustrations for colour supplements or politicians.

Where Bacon, like TS Eliot, derives his hope from the stasis of myth, he moves forward in the fluxus of archeology/history/anthropology. (See the ink drawings of what appear to be dancers, but could be any figures in movement). Bacon presents a frozen, private world of escape. Whereas, in his drawings, canvasses and constructions, McKenzie evokes rising and shaking and sweating and shitting and oozing.

\*

Surfaces of glue (cans of Evostick), white lead and wax.

\*

The large canvas 'Ancestral Presence' [detail shown]

Suffocation.

Suffocation. As if a pane of glass has been pressed against all this history, time is concertina-ed. The arrogance of our 'inevitable' progress is humbled. This is history painting without heroes. It does not escape

present panic by fleeing into an unambiguous othertime.

When asked about the huge central motif of this painting, he says straightforwardly that it is 'not a cross, but a horizontal and vertical configuration'.

Unlike Bellany's *Kinlochbervie* and *My Father*, there are plain fields in this work. No space unused. In *Ancestral presence*, you don't feel like the subject matter is stretched-to-fit, but rather that the images are crammed, trying to escape. This is a thread throughout his work. The difficulty of escape. Crowds. The heap that is history, crushing onto our backs. Nevertheless, the realisation of what we are losing is we junk this in its entirety. We may hate it but we must forget

The plate glass pulling living into dead and conscious thoughts into unconscious. Historical depth, but, again, not a myth that is one and immovable and objective, but a litter of them seen in the build-up of surfaces on the canvas which make content and form inseparable, at the end of history.

The glass pressing living and dead people together, making no discrimination. Bishops and shamen, analysts and soldiers, compressing all these different ages into an ever-present, and thus unavoidable history. nothing is lost: food, straw guts

\*

**Images recovered and reconceived in the barest and most particular light**

Leon Kossoff on Frank Auerbach

\*

The realisation that we have been

living in a floating limbo of total war. Not always people who we can recognise and not always people we can see on our screens. they may speak in diverse tongues.

How to depict this, how to account for it being soaked up by the artist's body and then coming out in the work as blood from an open vein.

That we are trapped in a post nuclear world that has been re-peopled. Constantly being reminded that we are trapped here.

\*

He does large-scale painting, but also carved and painted rock pieces and found wood, fenceposts, slates, hessian and tools also. Two oars lean against the middle of *Ancestral Presence*. These create the sound of water in your head, but are also funny. They never let you forget the illusion before your eyes. This critique and use of painting, together with the three dimensional work, pulls together two separate strands in Scottish Art: Bellany and, say, Bruce Maclean. He is not looking at them over his shoulder, but combining an interest in Kiefer and Beuys with his own experience of living in Glenrothes, but also in rural Fife and working for a while at a house in the Trossacks; plus his remembered experience of his father, and of course television and expressionist films.

Fossils. remains.

Another work has a head picked out of the concave section section of a rusted, painted, varnished spade.

Bones, archeology of existence and experience.

Several of the smaller scale works form

constellations of people who *may* be a family. Persons as if out of Tadeusz Kantor's *Nightclass*, but he does not know this work as far as i know. One of the slates shows fish surrounded by faces; another, a fish with faces and other fish. The colours being many browns, ochres, ambers (impossible to continue - no names available) all with a glaze utilized as if paint. And in the canvasses, he enjoys continually working the surfaces of the slates, working the surfaces of the slates over, building them up. Black mirrors no glass. Figures, shaps of tools emerge out of darkness, with soundtrack removed. There is always the threat for the spectator/the risk for the artist - of sliding into a virtually opaque morass - because of an unwillingness to go for the easy effect.

\*

A Viewmaster of images ending with his, then, would include the self portraits of Rembrandt, Van Gogh, the Black paintings of Goya (he spent one summer on a scholarship studying at the Orado), German Cinema from the inter-war years, Lucien Freud, but especially those outwith this tradition such as Joseph Beuys. Spinning this disc, clicking slowly then quickly.

\*

He has no desire to move to New York, London, Berlin or even Edinburgh for that matter.

From January to June 1987, Stuart McKenzie was the first Artist-in-Residence at Aberdeen City Art Gallery.



## EventSpace Project

**'SITES/POSITIONS'** A series of site-specific and site as location installation works, video and performance.

### Communication to Artists

**Site:** Ground on which town or building stood, stands or is to stand; place where some activity is or has been conducted.  
Locate; Place; Provide with site.

**Position:** Way in which thing or its parts are placed or arranged; mental attitude, way of looking at question.  
Proposition; statement of proposition.  
Place occupied by person or thing; proper place (in or out of position); place where troops are placed for strategic purposes.  
Situation in relation to other person or things.

### Criteria

1. Interested artists must submit a synopsis of their past work and current concerns.
2. Sites and locations are to be determined by the artist in consultation with *EventSpace* organisers.
3. The artist will be responsible for invigilation of artwork/event.
4. Official correspondence regarding hire of equipment, insurance and publicity will be undertaken by *EventSpace*, in consultation with the artist concerned.
5. Selected artists may be asked to attend or sit on any platform in a public forum in discussion of the event.
6. Selected artists must produce a black and white print and a written statement about the specific work, to be included in a catalogue.
7. Work will be selected by *EventSpace* organisers.

*Sites/Positions* is intended to be a collaborative venture between *EventSpace* and selected artists, thereby disrupting conventional artist/administrator roles by allowing the artists control over the context in which their work is shown.

*Sites/Positions*, through the nature of the medium/s employed:

- aims to challenge the passive role provided for art within the gallery or museum;
- assumes no previous known ways of presenting art to the public in Scotland;
- aims to test new approaches to artistic production and to take a position in relation to this.

Enquiries and submissions should be addressed to: 'EventSpace'  
Variant Magazine  
76 Carlisle St.  
GLASGOW G2t

## ORDER OUT OF CHAOS DISCARDED SCULPTURES

An idea has been put forward for a sculptural event to take place on December 1, 1987. (The term sculpture is not intended to exclude two-dimensional materials, simply that the siting of work should take into account its environment as one of its prior concerns.) From this event it is hoped to produce a book of documentation with the intention of having a small edition published.

Participants are asked to consider environments for the siting of objects or images. There should be no indication in the presentation of work to suggest its art value, title, origin or otherwise. The aim is simply to create, throughout Britain, a series of happenings. Work on this project should commence on the morning, 1 December and cease in the evening of the same day, occupying no more than 8 hours of the individual artists' time. Anything up to four pieces or objects per artist are suggested.

Once installed, the objects/images/installations should be photographed, in black and white or colour, and one small print (maybe contact size) sent

to one of the addresses below, together with a short description, including time, place, intention or content and the artist's name. The material will then be assembled into book form for the attention of potential publishers. (Notes/written descriptions might include drawings or diagrams, for example.) The intention is to place the art object in incidental environments, where it may be discovered accidentally rather than sought or advertised. Confidence is therefore placed in the integrity of the artist and the ability of the spectator.

**Order Out of Chaos** is an ongoing project, first established in 1984. To date, the artists involved have been, intentionally, anonymous; as such, the project has taken on its own identity. The documentation from the 'Discarded Sculptures' event will include the names of participants.

Anyone who is unclear concerning the proposal should contact: Paul Haywood, 151 Calderbrook Road, Littleborough, Lancs OL15 9JW, or Alison Marchant, 34b Colville Road, Leyton, London E11 4EH.



Ian Hamilton Finlay 'Talismans and Signifiers', photo Sean Hudson, courtesy Graeme Murray Gallery, Edinburgh.

# THOUGHTS ORIGINATING IN SEEING IAN HAMILTON FINLAY'S 'TALISMANS AND SIGNIFIERS'

Murdo McDonald

In 'Talismans and Signifiers' Ian Hamilton Finlay elucidates a cosmos of matter and thought through texts from classical and Renaissance authors which are coupled with emblematic pebbles and cubes of carved stone.<sup>1</sup> One of these pairings relates to the alchemist John Dee whose spelling of the word we now spell m-u-s-i-c was m-u-f-i-k-e.<sup>2</sup> Finlay positions these six letters on the six faces of a stone cube, relating it to Dee's conception of "the entire universe is like a lyre tuned by some excellent artificer, whose strings are separate species of the universal whole. Anyone who knew how to touch these dextrously and make them vibrate would draw forth marvellous harmonies." Such pythagorean notions have strong appeal to Finlay. His interest in classical thought (especially pre-Socratic thought i.e. that which predates the acknowledged starting point of modern thought) can be seen in one of the most initially puzzling areas of his work, his fascination with battleships and tanks. In 'Emblem 1984' he draws an analogy between a frigate and a Greek temple "for the temples of the Greeks our homesickness last for ever." Both frigate and temple are expressions of an aesthetic, each appropriate to the society from which it emerged. The inabilities of modern democracies to make use of a *symbol* of power such as a temple forces them to the alternative *actual* power of the warship, which is itself inevitably a symbol because the need is for a symbol, not for destruction. Finlay's interest in art as social criticism becomes clear. This is criticism of fundamental problems such as the nature of symbols and our implicit symbolic understanding of political structure. We take aircraft carriers for granted: Finlay asks "why?". The analogy between warship and temple is open to question, but consider that transcendent act of British piety, the Falklands War. The Task Force is the only societally-defined, non-secular focus most of us have experienced.<sup>3</sup> It is because Finlay holds up a mirror to the curious symbolic structure of Western culture that his work has (a) great attraction – it is commenting on us (b) great capacity to mystify – it is approaching assumptions we do not normally question (c) great capacity to annoy – it threatens these things we take for granted. As a base for this critique he situates himself firmly in Arcadia. Arcadia is where Utopia and Apocalypse co-exist.<sup>4</sup> It is where the concretised epistemology of a Utopia can be built in its fixed splendour. Such fixity has only one historical outcome: ruin. War and revolution are powered by, or at least implicit in, utopianism both with respect to the desire to destroy the present (inevitably) failed utopian dream and by the desire to create a new utopian dream. In response to Herbert Read's comment that in the back of every dying civilisation there is a bloody Doric column, Finlay, in the guise of Claude Cbimerique, replies that a perfect classical column stands as the inspiration for every revolutionary restructuring of society – that Finlay should take a guise which brings to mind Claude Lorrain, that subtle geometer of Arcadia, is appropriate. But is this the new order of Phidias or that of Speer? The classicism of Goethe or that of Hitler? This conflict is symbolised in the image of an arcadian landscape which conceals a panzer division. In a work based directly on Poussin's 'Et in Arcadia Ego', Finlay replaces the grave found by Poussin's shepherds with a rustic German tank. Novalis said of poetry that it must be inexhaustible "like a human being and a good aphorism."<sup>5</sup> Finlay's work has this quality. With it he explores the edges of prescribed meaning. His works are set in the paradoxical borderland between existence and symbol. He investigates what Blake was talking about when he said that nature has not outline but imagination has.<sup>6</sup> He is interested in facts in their most subtly obvious sense of things done, things made, the sense in which everything, symbol or otherwise, is factual. It is in this sense that Borges entitles one of his books 'El Hacedor' – the factor, the maker, the creator.<sup>7</sup> It is in this sense that Novalis called nature an encyclopaedic, systematic index or plan of the spirit.<sup>8</sup>

1. "Talismans and Signifiers" was shown at the Graeme Murray Gallery, Edinburgh in 1984. Book published 1984 by that gallery. Most other works referred to can be found in 'Ian Hamilton Finlay: a visual primer' by Yves Abrioux. The work referring to Poussin is in the Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh.

2. A very fine introduction to Dee's ideas and influence is Frances Yates' history of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century thought 'The Rosicrucian Enlightenment'.

3. This point can be explored via Mrs Thatcher's commitment to a conception of art which takes as its prototype a porcelain model of a group of paratroopers recapturing Goose Green.

4. A consideration of the interdependence of Utopia and Apocalypse (but not of Arcadia) can be found in 'The Only Real Phoenix' by Richard Gunn, Edinburgh Review, 71, 1985.

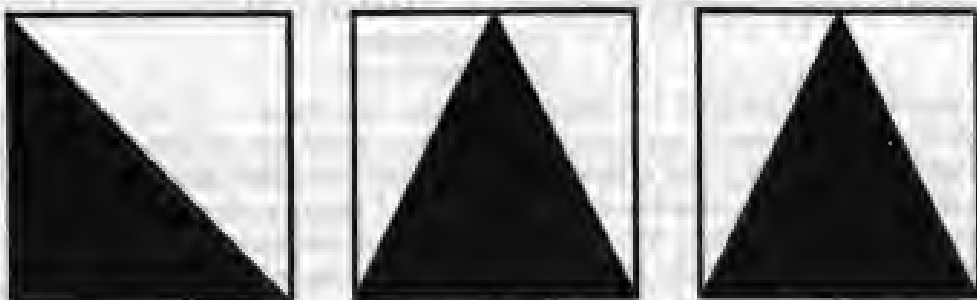
5. Novalis 'Aphorisms', trans Michael Hamburger (1945) in 'New Road', edited by Fred Marnau and published by Grey Walls Press, London.

6. Blake quoted by Herbert Read in 'The Meaning of Art'.

7. 'El Hacedor' is a group of poems and prose pieces published by Emece, Buenos Aires in 1960. It has not been translated in its original form, presumably due to some editorial phobia of having poetry and prose in the same book, but the piece from which the collection gets its name, translated as 'The Maker', can be found in an appendix to Borges' 'Selected Poems'.

8. As 5.





## NATIONAL ARTISTS' ASSOCIATION

THE N.A.A. was founded in January 1985, in Birmingham, after discussion among artists that started in London in the autumn of 1983.

When the N.A.A. was inaugurated, two pledges were made – we would represent all artists equally, democratically; and our policies would be open to input from artists everywhere. In this way we hoped the N.A.A. would have a radically different approach to art provision and funding in Britain from that of the existing institutions.

Two and a half years of the N.A.A.'s have produced – National Conferences in:

*1985 – Birmingham, London, Bristol, Colchester, Manchester;*

*1986 – Newcastle, Nottingham, London, Milton Keynes, Liverpool;*

*1987 – Birmingham, the 1st N.A.A. National Women's Conference, and Reading.*

At these conferences the discussions have been open, frank and constructive. Workshop sessions have been run by artists and other professionals with experience in various areas of the art world.

As a result of conference decisions, N.A.A. policy includes – *50/50 gender equality and statutory representation of black and Asian artists on the N.A.A. Management Committee.*

*Committee members are elected from all parts of England, at the Conferences – by the N.A.A. membership.*

Issues raised at N.A.A. conferences include – *art education, copyright, difficulties encountered by disabled artists, insurance of artworks, open exhibitions, policies of funding bodies, public exhibition right payments, racism and sexism in the world of art, social security, taxation.* These and other topics have been campaigning issues.

The N.A.A. issues a bi-monthly Bulletin free to all members, and publishes reports from the conferences and papers on topics of concern to artists.

We are currently preparing papers covering:  
model artists' contracts  
codes of practice for commissions, exhibitions, residencies  
the problems faced by women in art education

Our administration is funded from members' subscriptions – nothing else.

Although we have gained grants from the Regional Arts Associations (R.A.A.'s) for conferences and consultative meetings, we have no subsidy.

Our independence is important, but it is paid for with the voluntary, unpaid work of our Management Committee.

We are all working artists, and time given to the N.A.A. is precious. During the past two years the N.A.A. has been involved with the Arts Council and R.A.A.'s in discussing the future of the Exhibition Payment Right (E.P.R.) scheme. This is likely to be a hot issue in Scotland in the immediate future.

We have also initiated a series of consultative meetings between artists and the R.A.A.'s in the North, North West and Yorkshire. The R.A.A.'s have now agreed to fund these meetings, but the initiatives come from the N.A.A.

The N.A.A. represents visual artists on the governing body of the National Campaign for the Arts.

We have set up a Standing Conference with artists' organisations in Ireland and Wales, which meets regularly to co-ordinate policy for artists across the national boundaries. *We hope that Scotland will soon also be represented.*

*A second Standing Conference links the N.A.A. with the Artspace Federation, the national association of artists' studio groups. Other artists organisations may be linked to the N.A.A. through non-voting associate membership.*

N.A.A. branches exist in: Bristol, London, Loughborough, Merseyside, Newcastle (Artists Forum), North West England, Nottingham, Oxford, Sheffield. New branches are planned in Cornwall, Cumbria, and Norwich.

*It may be that a possible national organisation of artists in Scotland would find it useful to be linked to the N.A.A., through either a Standing Conference, or associate membership. All of us in the N.A.A. in England would welcome such a development. Greater unity amongst artists means greater bargaining power, greater strength.*

© Roland Miller, 1987

# WHY PLAGIARISM?

ANYONE WITH MORE than half a brain will agree that art has never been a 'superior' activity, and that even as a 'therapy' it holds little attraction unless one is really raking in the money. Ideologically art is used to promote an ethic of individual, or separated, subjectivity. Such a practice is encouraged by high financial rewards, which endow art with the secondary characteristic of being an 'unofficial' stock market, in which capital can be valorised at increasingly accelerated rates.

Regarding the forms of art as propaganda, there are a multitude of conflicting opinions, each reflecting the sectional interests of the varied racketeers with an investment staked in the maintenance of this society. While some claim that 'art' is the province of a few men (sic) of 'genius', there are others who shout that 'art must be made by all'. However, reformist positions never go beyond rhetoric. Art is a commodity relation, and the admission of art by all onto the market would cause a drastic fall in the rate of profit.

Art has never been about quality. There is no intrinsic difference between 'failed' works (i.e. those that remain unsold because their makers are unable to persuade a gallery to promote them in the market) and those which become art upon the realisation of an exchange value. Of course the 'picture' is somewhat complicated by public and corporate 'funding'. Subsidies are a prestige investment. The 'art work' itself has always played a secondary role.

Art must always emphasise the 'individuality' of ownership and creation. Plagiarism, by contrast, is rooted in social process, communality, and a recognition that society is far more than the sum of individuals (both past and present) who constitute it. In practice social development has always been based on plagiarism (one only has to observe children to realise that advancement is 99% imitation), but this reality is mystified by the ideology of 'art'. Art itself is based on pictorial traditions built up over thousands of years, and yet art

historians and critics always focus on the very minor, usually negligible, 'innovations' of each 'individual' artist.

We are not denying the possibility of rapid transformation, indeed we are critical of capitalism precisely because it implies such a process. Woman creates herself, not individually, but on the social level. When a mass of people 'believe' something it becomes possible. Art, by emphasising 'individual' subjectivity, inhibits the development of a collective intersubjectivity, which could transform the world a million times in the time it takes to paint a single picture.

To draw attention to these facts, the literary and artistic 'heritage' of womanity must be used for partisan propaganda purposes. Naturally, we will go beyond any idea of 'scandal', since the pseudo-negation of art has been boring us for the past 80 years. Drawing a mustache on the 'Mona Lisa' is not in itself interesting, but it does indicate certain possibilities. The recent 'shooting' of the Leonardo cartoon in the National Gallery (London) was an exemplary act. The seriousness with which this incident was treated by the media left the majority of the population, to whom art means nothing, shaking with mirth.

Acts of 'art vandalism' are only found shocking by those who see 'individual genius' as the ultimate justification of private property. The appearance of new necessities outmodes previous 'inspired' works. They are obstacles, dangerous habits. The point is not whether we like them or not. Plagiarism necessitates that we go beyond this.

Any elements, no matter where they are taken from, can serve in making new combinations. When two objects are brought together, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be, a relationship is always formed. The mutual interference of two worlds of feeling, or the bringing together of two independent expressions, supersedes the original elements and produces a synthetic organisation of greater efficacy. Anything can be used.

It is here, in the creation of new meanings, that we see most clearly the divergence between plagiarism and post-modern ideology. The plagiarist has no difficulty with meanings, reality, truth. The plagiarist sees no crisis of the sign – only the continual transformation of human relationships within a social context. When a post-modernist talks of plagiarism they call it 'appropriation' (transfer of ownership) in an attempt to maintain the ideological role of the artist. As Capitalism sinks further into crisis, it becomes increasingly difficult for any 'individual' artist to exude an appearance of 'originality'. Reacting to this 'impossible' situation the post-modernist takes on a 'corporate' image and 'copyrights' an ill-digested assortment of fragments. This is in direct contrast to the plagiarist who, rather than accepting this stasis, seeks to speed up the process of decay, and opposes both modernism and post-modernism (which are but two stages in the trajectory of Capital) with the totality of communist transformation.

Lautreamont, perhaps the best known exponent of plagiarism, is still misunderstood by many of his 'admirers'. In the 'Poesies', he uses plagiarism (drawing on the ethical maxims of Pascal and Vauvenargues) to reduce arguments, through successive concentrations, to maxims alone. However, Viroux still managed to cause considerable astonishment in the 50's by demonstrating that 'Maldoror' is, among other things, one vast plagiarism of Buffon and other works of natural history. That Viroux saw this as justification for disparaging Lautreamont, was less surprising than the fact that certain of his 'admirers' thought it necessary to defend him by praising his insolence! There will be no social transformation until the slogan 'Plagiarism is necessary, progress implies it', is widely understood. Once such an understanding occurs, industrialisation and information technology will be left looking like left-overs from the stone age.

Ideas and realisations in the realm of plagiarism can be multiplied at

will. For the moment we will limit ourselves to showing a few concrete possibilities starting from various current sectors of communication – it being understood that these separate sectors are significant only in relation to present-day techniques, and are all tending to merge into superior syntheses.

There is not much future in the plagiarism of painterly styles. For the moment we indulge ourselves with these pastiches merely to demonstrate that anyone can produce a work of 'genius', the production is not a

problem – it is the marketing that confers the accolade. The use of plagiarised phrases in posters, records, and radio broadcasts, is well known and widespread.

A plagiarised architecture begins with an experimental baroque stage, the architectural complex – which we conceive as the construction of a dynamic environment related to style of behaviour. Once plagiarism is extended to urbanistic realisations not many people will remain unaffected. We propose the exact reconstruction in one city of an entire neighbourhood

of another. Plagiarism can never be too complete, done on this level the destruction of the old world could not be far away.

The methods we have dealt with here are not our own inventions, but represent a widespread practice which we seek to make visible. Plagiarism deals with the connectedness of things. These ideas are not new, they didn't appear as if from 'nowhere', like everything around us they arose from the collective activity of creating, and recreating, the world.

*Bob Jones*

# FESTIVAL OF PLAGIARISM

The Festival of Plagiarism is a decentralised London-wide event that will take place in January and February 1988. Overall co-ordination is by Graham Harwood and Stewart Home, but individual events may be organised by other people. Opportunities exist for participation in confirmed shows. We are also keen for individuals to come forward with additional events to place under the umbrella of the Festival. We can be contacted at our central address given at the bottom of this sheet. Confirmed events to date are:

**'Plagiarism – The Living Tradition'** in the Crypt, Bloomsbury Way, WC1, running from 14th to 28th January 1988. A group installation.

**'Karen Eliot – Apocrypha'** at Community Copy Art, Culross Buildings, Battle Bridge Road, NW1, running from 28th January to 28th February. This is a group show where all work submitted will be exhibited under the 'fictitious' name Karen Eliot. Work should imitate the style of a well-known artist or media campaign. Any media welcome. There is no submission fee and the work will not be juried. Small works may be posted to us at our central address to arrive not later than 21st January 1988. Larger pieces should be brought in person to the gallery on Monday 25th or Wednesday 27th January between noon and 6pm.

**'Crucifixion & Canonization'** in The Gallery, St. James's Piccadilly, W1, running from 1st to 12th February 1988. Send A4 images of any famous person being canonized or crucified. Submissions should reach our central address by 1st December 1987. Graham Harwood and Graham Tansley will rework them, while the original images will be displayed in a special exhibition of plagiarised book-binding organised by Jeni Briggs. Documentation to all participants.

**'There Is No Natural Religion'** in the Wren Cafe, St. James's Piccadilly, W1, running from 4th to 28th February. Blake images reworked in a modern setting by Graham Harwood.

**'Humanity In Ruins'** at Central Space, Faroe Road, W14, running from 11th February to 3rd March. Audio installation by Karen Eliot, which reworks Marlowe's 'Dr. Faustus' against the setting of riot-torn Britain.

Escape Gallery, Greenwich, South London: dates and work to be confirmed.

Bedford Hill Gallery, Balham, South London: dates and work to be confirmed.

The Crypt, Bloomsbury Way, WC1: 'Iconoclasm', work by Gordon Muir and Malcolm Dickson.

All correspondence should be sent to our central address:

Graham Harwood & Stewart Home, Festival of Plagiarism, 49 Sherwin House, Kennington Park Estate, London SE11 5SE. Telephone: 01-735 0589.

# IS THERE SUCH A THING AS A WORKING CLASS AESTHETIC?

Stefan Szczelkun

OF COURSE NO ONE would deny there is working class culture but it is always equated with things *as they exist*. Working class culture is recognised to exist in forms such as popular entertainment, community art, folk art 'traditions' and commercial images. What is missing and is in fact DENIED is an intellectual class conscious contemporary art practice which actively concerns itself with working class liberation.

It is impossible for us to imagine a working class intellectual high culture because the working class by definition of the oppression that makes class division cannot be intellectual. In this way oppression denies the working class the *cultural leadership* it requires for its emancipation. By 'cultural leadership' I do not mean cadres but a community in which it is possible to have a discourse on the basis of certain common assumptions of identity, experience, history, viewpoint and so on. Such a debate would dismantle the cultural aspects of working class oppression and explore the radical and *structural means* of working class liberation. An intellectual debate does not have to be esoteric. It may need 'terms' but these can be glossaried and generally made accessible. (I would pause here to consider the multi-farious ways in which intellectual and working class have been held to be mutually exclusive categories *simply because they have been in the past*. This has its causes in the separation of the workplace and the academies amongst other things but this separation is a function of oppression rather than a truth).

By 'structural means' I'm indicating a culture that is an actual part of the social process of human relating rather than something set apart, specialised, esoteric, applied... One of my assumptions is that class society cannot end without the working class emancipating itself. This process can only take off in earnest when the majority of people have the tools to remake culture as a mediation of human values in social life. Culture is not something like an additive, a

luxury, but the very means of production of the concepts of value that give direction and motivation to the concrete production and organisation of life.

The W/C intellectual cultural workers exist. They are dispersed and isolated in Folk, Community, Popular entertainment, Fine art, academic and commercial sectors. As such their efforts, when they are not damped at source by the virulent in-house classism that exists in nearly all of these sectors. For a culture to be effective it must bind, unite, have homogenities across the board. It must claim its leadership as intellectually serious W/C culture (I know my own awkwardness in trying to say these things makes this sound pretentious and it isn't right yet...). And above all it must be *visible*. An intellectual community within the working class does not have to constitute a dreaded elite or even for that matter a fixed entity. The debate and the definition of artist can be open to anyone willing to put in the time to think and communicate. Nonetheless it must be assertive and express its identity clearly in spite of the attacks it will draw from all sides (obviously the working class have internalised a generalisation of intellectuals as the enemy and a great deal of our effort will be needed to remake this fracture).

The perspective that needs to be consolidated on this difficulty is that the *recognition* of a W/C intellectual culture is contrary to the basis of class oppression which is founded on the assumption that the W/C are essentially lesser than the upper classes (loosely). Usually this is a genetic inferiority. But the manner of this inferiority in English terms is essentially a matter of intelligence. And this 'intelligence' is proven/demonstrated in intellectual product and discourse. As the W/C cannot be intellectual by definition so the intellectual scene cannot accommodate working class viewpoint (assuming here that oppression is practically ubiquitous and controls all definitions, that being the base line of its power).

In practical terms what is required

for a working class intellectual culture to become active rather than latent are between 5 and 10,000 people who would buy books (this sort of market is required to sell a run of min. 1,000) and become active in debate. Then below this networks formed in localities or subject/interest areas willing to take a critical/supportive relation to each other's work. Sharing sources, discussion, letters, lectures etc. So this relies on 10,000 W/C people who have either self educated or been through tertiary education who are active intellectually and still have a hold on a W/C identity;

a) Become self conscious of themselves in relation to the issue of W/C oppression and hold out some hope or see the need for W/C liberation.

b) To know about the other 9,999 and have means to know what they are up to.

Of course people in other areas than culture or related areas would take an interest so perhaps it doesn't have to be 10,000?

Let's say instead that I imagine that a W/C culture will not be so abruptly divided into areas like theatre, art, film etc., especially with regard to aesthetic debate. Although practically things will remain separate and first possibly become open to more inter specialist migrancy. So one of the strategies would be to get class discussed across the cultural board and get class discussed simultaneously in terms of all the cultural media.

The main question is how to activate the W/C people, who are often in influential positions, in culture?

W/C oppression is the last major oppression to form a liberation movement. In my mind this is inevitable, if the great debates and struggles of Women, Black, Homosexuals, Disabled had not occurred then class would be a very confusing issue. Now those areas have been clarified to some extent then class liberation is possible. Not only that but the effect of moving on class oppression is that the other areas are united for the mass of the population. In this way W/C liberation is a unifying force.



THE TASK OF the radical artist today is to attack the prevailing methods of production, distribution and consumption of art; as has been the concern of the avant-garde this century. The notion of art as confrontation went into a demise in the late sixties with the recuperation of political activism in general. In the late seventies, punk music and its way of life brought a new working class voice to the forefront of popular culture, its hardened attitudes appropriately meeting the growing intolerance of material circumstances of urban culture. That brief manifestation and its resultant recuperation by the forces of Capital (into the language of fashion, ads and the glamorisation of misery) have served as a politicising experience for many now active in, or on the periphery of, the art world.

By taking power into their own hands, Art in Ruins (Glyn Banks and Hannah Vowles) avoid entrenchment through strategies of intervention in the artworld. This 'positive interference' has been seen in non-art spaces, in semi-public spaces (such as polytechnic galleries and foyers), alternative spaces (Chisenhale Space in London, Transmission in Glasgow) and in prestigious private galleries (Gimpel Fils in London).

Art in Ruins make arrangements of ruins of culture; they are manipulators of the discarded which embody the dead ideologies of the past and present. The objects which they use are never neutral, since they have a prehistory; these are re-activated in their mixed media installations. As Kienholz claimed to understand a culture by what he found in its garbage cans and flea markets, Art in Ruins speculate on ours by what they find in its antique shops, museums, discos, architecture and popular culture. Unlike traditional mediums of art where one looks at a unique creation made by the artist, one revolves uneasily in a constructed environment of things taken by the artists. Notions of originality and authenticity are undermined through the manipulation and re-arrangement of already existing artifacts. On a superficial level, these 'artworks' do not appear aesthetically pleasing or display exemplary technical skill; good taste and a sense of balance are turned upside down. This is not simply the reversal of academic traditions which are useless in coming to terms with the crisis of our 'post-modern social condition' but highlights also the fragmentary character of art and the alienating privilege of being an artist today.

The methods at the disposal of Art in Ruins crosses boundaries; from installation arrangements and critical writing to organising their own exhibitions, often in collaboration with others such as John Coleman in the early eighties (when they operated under the name Common Knowledge) or with the group that emerged out of the 'Our Wonderful Culture' show at

the Crypt in '85. This group, comprising Banks and Vowles, Ed Baxter, Stefan Szczelkun, Andy Hopton, Simon Dickason and Karen Eliot collaborated on the 'Ruins of Glamour, the Glamour of Ruins' exhibition at Chisenhale Space in London and in the 'Desire in Ruins' exhibition at Transmission

What characterised these shows was an aggressively anti-aesthetic stance and a 'nihilistic deconstruction'. Writing in *Performance Magazine* in '86 (no. 40), *Art In Ruins* wrote:

"With the straw covered floor, the sheets of corrugated iron scattered around, the 'over-hanging' of the work drew attention beyond the neutral (natural) white space of the modern world, towards a different, 'corrupted' context – a context which challenged the content of the work, the 'integrity' of the artist and the 'authority' of the artwork, and in which the audience finds itself at the centre of the debate about decisions concerning quality, relevance and meaning in our museum culture."

These are 'extra-artistic' factors which influence many artists today



# WHITE

and which is informed by analytical theory, the identification with other oppositional enclaves and in locating art practice within a wider context of resistance to the forces of capitalism. Art in Ruins combine this informed position with wit and irony, in one sense by parodying their own roles by dressing in black to 'mourn their own

Road to Ruin installation  
Stoke-on-Trent City Museum and Art Gallery, England 1986



# ART IN



# TRASH

deaths as creators of meaning' and by deciding to operate through the practice of art in the first place. In their practice, the line between creative and critical forms become blurred and the object of artmaking becomes a tactical necessity. In this sense, they may be identified with a 'post-modernism of resistance' as Hal Foster puts it in the

introduction to the book 'Post Modern Culture'.

The notion that post-modernism has represented a breaking down of barriers between artforms, where the past becomes a concept to plunder, that modern myths of progress are now redundant is used as much as an excuse by 'post-modern' artists for politicised action and critique as it is by those who are positive and precise about what they use, what they criticise and why they are criticising it. Art in Ruins not only engage in 'semiotic guerrilla warfare' and in a 'nihilistic deconstruction', but argue the significance of doing so. Those artists who say that anything goes, that ideology is dead, that politics doesn't matter because it doesn't work, are merely serving the interests of capitalism through the idea that reality is so complex, that the world is in such a state of crisis, that there is **nothing to be done** and if we did anything it would be worthless tomorrow anyhow. The art world today comprises of too many artists trying to infiltrate it as if it were something they were not already

complying to. This way of thinking is shared by the intellectualism of the new curators and critics for whom 'political art' is tailored. As Banks puts it:

"...it has become normal practice for both 'radical' and 'conservative' artists alike to define themselves as dispossessed members of society and it is perhaps how this dispossession then, is defined; that is, how artists define their relationship to their concept of their audience. It is in the citing of the artist's resentful 'bad faith' and its relationship to a 'whole way of life' which defines the role of culture as a critical and oppositional activity."

It is not surprising, however, that those complicit with the presentation of history through the museum will partially succeed in using Art in Ruins to reaffirm the very institutions which their practice essentially undermines. The 'repressive tolerance' of that system will utilise whatever attacks it in order to prove its liberalism. Art in Ruins have the versatility and awareness not to leave the present field of culture to them or to mix wilfully with them. They avoid taking a clearly identifiable position (and perhaps, therefore, a manageable one), and don't stay still long enough to be categorised, comforted, or co-opted.

The work of Art in Ruins is appropriately 'of its time'. Its effect is all-pervading. It annoys us and amuses us, but it doesn't entertain or comfort.

To a radical critic, Art in Ruins are too radical. To a reactionary critic they are cynical, anti-art and full of 'unrelieved pessimism', attitudes they might amuse themselves with. But that misinterpreted pessimism is, in fact, an opening out of possibilities. Their work is there to be questioned, not ignored; it questions us and makes us questions ourselves as viewers, it questions itself, what has gone before it and what surrounds it in the present. It brings on a vertigo effect out of which a questioning process emerges.

In the confrontation of established values and hierarchies, the creation of challenging installations within the gallery and beyond is one way we have of attacking the art of the past and the conservatism of the present. We are revealed by our shit. The glamour of the artworld and the seduction of power will not circumvent the collisions inherent in a culture of contention.

© Malcolm Dickson



Art in Ruins (Glyn Banks and Hannah Vowles) are the new artists in residence at Edinburgh University from October '87 to March '88.

# N RUINS

# THE PROMISE OF TRADITION

AN INSTALLATION  
BY ADAM GEARY



Adam Geary's installation works 'The Security of Belief' and 'The Promise of Tradition' were seen during September '87 at Transmission Gallery. Photos 'The Promise of Tradition' with central piece.

The doctrine of the Sovereignty of Parliament, invented in the Eighteenth Century to excuse the privatisation of common lands, continues to be enforced from the Palaces of Westminster. an environment designed to impress and inspire awe -- to make all who enter feel that the processes of governing are too powerful and mysterious for ordinary mortals to understand.

Before gaining admission to this charmed circle, members must first undergo obscure initiation ceremonies. After which, the rituals of behaviour in the sacred chamber can be taught and the special private places that have been allocated. taken up. Secure now in the knowledge that the public cannot penetrate, members are then left free to exercise the absolute power that they now hold.

These old conservative institutions that form the British Establishment were created by and for a ruling class, now figured in a privileged, white male, Southern and City capitalist elite. Employing anti-democratic checks and balances designed to resist any change of an economic and social kind, and reliant on mechanisms that exclude outsiders or immigrants to its charmed circle, these institutions have remained intact, defending the status quo with **THE PROMISE OF TRADITION.**

# A SCOTTISH STORY

## karen eliot

*"I spake af the professional men and the artists os villeins. What else are they? One and all, the professors, the preachers, and the editors, hold their jobs by serving the Plutocracy, and their service consists af propogoting only such ideas as are either harmless to ar commendatary of the Plutocracy. Whenever they prapagate ideas that menace the Plutocracy, they lose their jabs, in which cose, if they have not provided far the roiny day, they descend into the proletariat and either perish ar become working-class ogitotors. And don't forget thot it is the press, the pulpit, and the university that mauld public opinion, set the thought-pace of the nation. As far the artists, they merely pander ta the little less than ignable tastes af the Plutocracy."*

Karen eliot smiled as s/he switched off the VDU making the text vanish in a crackle of static. One day s/he would seduce jack london – that might be fun. A tingle of exhilaration at the prospect ran electric through the nerves of his/her crotch. Karen pictured in her/his mind a tundra landform. A log cabin; wolves baying against an obsidian artie night in which the aurora borealis raced complementing the cosmic energies of the 2 lovers. One day s/he would plagiarise that paragraph but where did the arts council fit within that scheme of things? Firmly in the fist of the plutocracy, thats where. A wet nurse for the state with all the hopeful would-be artists hanging on desperately suckling barren nipples. Paps that threatened to dry & shrivel up daily. What happened to our artists once those wrinkled titties dehydrated? Poor things. They were driven to seek refuge among the proletariat in mediocre jobs where their precious artschool training was irrelevant. Artists as bin wo/men, shop assistants, community programme assistants, computer operators, bar wo/men, asylum attendants, lackies & skivvies. Then again there was a more sinister profile to the comic features of the arts council. Karen recalled the horrifying realities of the emergency powers act of 1987. Under a state of national emergency all potential subversives & dissenters would be rounded up & placed under arrest for an indefinite period of time within 24 hours. These innocents would comprise refugees,

foreign nationals, intellectuals, poets, writers & artists. & how would 'they' know where to find all these potentially dangerous elements – in arts council files – where else? Karen smiled wryly for s/he had never been one of the arts council's pet capuchins. S/he was able to travel through time relatively freely & safely making artistic & political actions as well as stealing.

### A SPLINTERED CURRICULUM VITAE OF KAREN ELIOT

1985 travelled in time & assumed role of multiple personaly karen eliot.

1985 to 1990 published various smile magazines including numbers 8 to 12, vol 63, vol 1 issue 6/7 & smile 4

1985 to 1990 wrote enumerable texts & tracts including 'Theses on mailart' & 'Artists strike' april 1986

Orientation for the use of a context (leaflet) july 1986

The young ling master (story) july 1986

Various texts in 'Neoism Now', haufen press w. germany december 1986

Ling & the drag act caper (story) january 1987

'Plagiarism' the unabridged saga of an event july 1988

1985 to 1990 participated in various art events & exhibitions including:

I am a 20th century artist (group show) france february 1986

The business of desire (group show) london may 1986

Small products (group show) dundee september 1986

Photo-day duets (group show) london february 1987

Desire in ruins (group show) glasgow may 1987

The festival of plagiarism (group show) london 1988

The festival of unemployment (group show) scotland 1989

1990 to 1993 organised & participated in the artists strike during which time researched scottish history travelling into the past & future stealing sperm & body fluids.

Karen eliot successfully robbed St Serf, Macbeth, Robert The Bruce, William Wallace, Robert Burns, Montrose, James Hogg, John Knox, Dr Livingstone, Adam Smith, Carnegie, McGonagall, McDiarmid & Ramsay McDonald of their sperm as well as Lady Macbeth, Mary Queen of Scots, Mary Slessor, Flora McDonald,

Joan Eardley, Queen Elizabeth 2nd & Sheena Easton of their body fluids. 1994 to 2000 organised various terrorist activities including the bombing of the cenotaph in london as a protest to the 2nd falklands war of 1995

Participated in the hijack of an air cargo of exotic pets en route from taiwan to new york october 1996

Participated in the bombing of the new smithfield market london march 1997 in support of equal opportunities for all living creatures

Organised & participated in the occupation of the BBC london 1997 as a protest to media censorship of pirate tv broadcasting organisations.

This action resulted in the burning down of the building which neither side in the dispute assumed responsibility for.

1998 organised the first successful intervention of US space programme halting by sabotage the launch of a military personnel & weapons shuttle. 1990 organised the global computer artists strike which terminated with the bombing & total destruction of the IBM building in new york.

A golden sun blazed violent raking savage shadows between the stooks of oats marching in ranks across the harvest fields. The howe of fife had once been a lake now it was a rich agricultural valley sown with small villages & farms. As if to give it some weight & further importance it even had a royal seat although the local peasantry cared little for it. Knox walked purposefully & solemnly across the warm landscape. Doughy balls of cloud lazily hung in the great soupy blue of heaven looking blessedly down onto the top of knox's balding pate. In his gnarled weatherbeaten hand he carried a bible; his prime weapon against all earthly enemies along with his caustic tongue which lashed freely given the occasion. It was not far from the shores of loch leven to the lomond hills & he could easily have reached his preaching place in 2 or 3 hours if he so chose but knox fancied biding the nicht wi the minister at kinneswood afore making a final assault upon the bishop hill in the morning. He was expected to deliver a sermon tae the gid fowk o'fife an hoor afore noon. As knox walked, head slightly bowed, assuming the gait of a



man deep in thoct, a large raindrop landed wet & heavy on the centre of his baldness to follow a natural course doon atween his hair follicles & on doon the back o' his nape. Knox checked his stride & looked glumly heavenward. He frowned & uttered a profanity deeply beneath his breath lest anyone overhear. For above & all around him dark ominous thunder clouds has assumed lordship over the skies. Know kent at that moment that he wis in fur a drookin. However being weel acquainted with the locale knox kent a wee byre that stood among some trees overby the burn close to the track. He made the rickety pinewood door before his clothing was soaked through but his clawlike hands & corvine features dripped mournfully. The black skinned bible too was a victim of god's wrath. A shower thoct knox optimistically & with that he found a pile of hay on which to lay & kill time. The byre was empty save for a twittering of sparrows in the eaves & like as no mice oot o sicht abin the bags o' barley. The torrential rain beat a crazy tattoo on the roof forcing gloaming to give way to a menacing gloom. Knox fell to sleeping.

Karen eliot lay naked on a white sheeted bed s/he held a plump, squat syringe in her/his right hand. S/he wetted her/his lips in anticipation. S/he loved to tease her/himself building up to the right moment. Her/his pulse quickened & her/his mouth grew dry. A tightness gripped her/his crotch & her/his nipples tensed & hardened. A fix of time juice, sting, zapp, call-it-what-you-will was like sex only more orgasmic; more penetrating; more shattering & far more moving in every sense. Being a time junkie was a dangerous habit because only state personnel had authority to travel through time & anyone caught unauthorised in the time zones was exterminated on sight. This control made time juice very expensive as it could only be procured through underground contacts. Illicit secret laboratories manufactured sting for street use. It was not so potent as that of the state chemists but it did the trick with no evil side effects. Karen eliot pays for her/his habit by stealing from time. The sperm of famous figures fetches high prices as do body fluids for cloning. Current social & political trends precipitated by government conspiracies have favoured the artificial reproduction of famous figures from the past. This has excluded the proletariat from culture by removing the necessity to educate them. They remain an enslaved, marginalised workforce deprived of all opportunity to better themselves while

the oligarchy breed a race of super-humans built from past achievements. During the span of man's endeavours the bourgeoisie have loved to live in the past damning the necessity for change. Only the imprisoned, downtrodden proletariat have demanded change - screamed for the door of their prison to open so they might escape. Now the rich bitches can artificially fertilise their ova with exorbitant sperm collected from anyone they choose from catalogues of the past.

The black bible lay across knox's deep chest where he had let it slip as he slid easily into slumber. He breathed slowly & rhythmically his eyelids fluttering & his gaunt facial muscles flickering as tho in sleep he was straining to focus upon some far off vision. Knox could not believe that his own mother should be cavorting naked in unabashed innocence before him. She appeared girl-like but her face was as old as he remembered her before death. His mother's figure however was sexually prime with firm jutting pale breasts, a smooth rounded belly & hips so plentiful as to bring tears to the eyes of a man of knox's senior standing. He was a fisherman dressed in oiled canvas breeks & heavy oiled yarn jersey. The small drifter to which he was a crewman lay snarled on rocks. Throngs of evergreen seaweed writhed about her body grappling & arresting her motion. Various attempts to refloat her had failed. There were another 2 crew. Together they formed a strange trinity bent on harvesting the sluggish saline waters. The captain was the oldest member rasping out orders while using his vast mariner's hands to grip the bulwarks rocking the hull of his imprisoned vessel. The boat's mate was the same age as knox & remained a vague mystery with no clear personality. Knox's mother lay curled under a blanket in a foetal position. He could hear her weeping. She was confined to a small pram. Knox pulled back the cover to reveal her naked form & see her tears glistening in the moonlight. "Whits tae dae mither?" But afore she could answer the fury of the giant captain had freed the fishingboat & it sailed without knox. His mother announced that she was going to walk to london alone. How ridiculous thoct knox as she stood disguising her age inside the body of a 17 year old. Her hand reached out through the darkness to tug at the hem of his breeks. Knox could smell her warm musk & feel her female guile seduce him. Reluctantly or was it sweetly he gave way. What else could a man do if a man was really what he was? A man

was made to fuck a woman when nae cloth cam atween them. The boat had sailed & he marooned had no option but to give way to the lusts of his flesh.

Karen eliot's pulse quickened & her/his hand quivered in anticipation. Her/his veins stood proud & full beneath her/his pale skin. Only the point of the syringe's needle remained between here & now & another zone - another reality. So fine a barrier. Such a slender divider. Just a prick. This build-up game was a deliberate form of masturbation & karen knew that s/he would pierce her/his skin timely at the exact moment of climax to explode internally & externally in orgasmic transformation. S/he rubbed the tip of the needle up & down the soft white skin of her/his inner-thigh. Her/his skin cried. A silent wail broke from her/his throat. Oh god this was a blissful agony. Where would s/he pierce her/his skin? Such a thin barrier.

The black tome of religious texts fell from the ledge that was knox's chest & skidded tumbling in a miniature avalanche of rustling paper doon aff the bed of hay. In his passion enraged sleep knox clutched at the fabric of his restraining garb. He desired to tumble naked as a babe upon the rug of pubic thatch that wis his mither's comfort. His stiff prick pressed hard against the cloth walls of its prison & knox somnambulantly tore down the walls of that jerico freeing the swelling bulge then gripping it in an eager hand to release from it a sweet blast of gospel music.

The sting seared hot into the redrun passageway to pound its burning course toward her/his pumping ventricles where within moments it would surge with explosive ecstasy & intensity into the recesses of her/his brain creating a brilliant cascade of light & spectral colour behind her/his retinas. In that release of light & pure energy karen eliot dissolved into the material of the universe. A trick of precise thought determined her/his route.

With ½ his being in the vortex of sleep & dream & ½ conscious staring with wide unseeing eyes knox squeezed his overripe root. His sinewy hand gripped like a vine midway around the shaft's girth. With ever increasing strokes knox coaxed his sexual apparatus toward a tingling climax. Behind his eyes visions chased crazy races round his brain. Castle towers, the lost fishing vessel, his mither's 17 year old breasts, mary, the milking parlour, thighs, the black skinned mocking accusing book, the guilt, oh the sweetness of guilt, for this brief

time he would escape, her open mouth, the boat on the loch, her spreading legs as she bent over the bed chamber chair. Knox shuddered in every muscle, every synapse sung electrically, his heart spasmed – jerked – found another gear. His pulse ballooned his veins bloating them under thin calvinistic skin. The light burnt his cerebral cortex. All vision was lost in the liquidity of light. His very body seemed to dissolve & merge with the melting interior that had been the byre. Reality had been squeezed like a juicy berry – the resulting syrup containing all living form & energy in one boiling infusion. Knox swam within the glory of his own orgasm: he

had no choice – it was all he could do to breathe. Beads of sweat pearled onto his forehead. Rivulets of perspiration dribbled into the clover scented hay from his hairy oxters. His chest heaved. Hands were upon his chest their fingers scratching, burying into the hair roots. A pale face painted; hair silvery in the nebula of this melting universe; lips red & parted. Breasts proudly nipped jiggled with the rhythm of this riding angel. God has sent an angel thocht Knox – a miracle. Or is it satan – a trap – a witch to partner my sin – to seize me in my moment of freedom – grab me at my weakest & drag me burning, screaming into hell. Knox ½ sat & stretched

forward expecting (praying for) his brown hands to pass through this vapourish genie astride him instead they rested on distinct fleshy matter. He felt the beings presence & form. Knox yelled & passed into a faint. From outside the byre appeared to glow. It was as tho its timewarped interior burnt without smoke or flame. Every chink, knothole, gap, window & door was visible in the darkness of evening. Then with a sudden burst of white light it immediately went dark instantly merging with the deep shadows of neighbouring nature. It has stopped raining.

## WORKING PRESS

WORKING PRESS first two paperbacks by living artists... published on 5th November 1987.



**COLLABORATIONS** Routine Art Co. compiled by Stefan Szczelkun. 112 pages. More than 50 photos and other line artwork describing with explanatory text and original documents the collaborative art projects of Szczelkun and others 1983 to '87. Includes work by over 200 artists. £4.50 incl. P&P.

**JOHN and other stories.** by Graham Harwood. 96 pages. Three picture narratives. The first narrative is an account of John 'the ordinary man's' life. The second concerns Churchill's funeral as a media icon. The third is about the clash of art and the material world from a working class viewpoint. £4.50 incl. P&P (make out cheques to WORKING PRESS).

First edition of 1,000. If we can sell these we hope to follow with a series of books by and about working class artists. WORKING PRESS is a non-profit making organisation to help and encourage artists to produce work in a paperback format.

Enquiries to WORKING PRESS 85 St Agnes Place, Kennington, LONDON, SE11 4BB.

# ALBA

*Documenta 8*  
*Edinburgh International Fest.*  
*Neo-Geo to Minimal Baroque*  
*Calum Colvin*  
*Timothy Hyman on Domenico 2*  
*Tiepolo*  
*Public Art Courses*

### Subscriptions:

Alba,  
Peter Hill,  
Talbot Rice Art Centre  
University of Edinburgh  
Old College, South Bridge  
EDINBURGH EH8 9YL  
Tel: (031) 667 7895

Subsidised by the Scottish Arts Council



3 October-21 November

ENZO CUCCHI

28 November-10 January

ALAN JOHNSTON  
THOMAS STRUTH

The Fruitmarket Gallery  
29 Market Street, Edinburgh EH1 1DF  
Telephone 031-225 2383

10-5.30 Tuesday-Saturday 1.30-5.30 Sunday Closed Monday

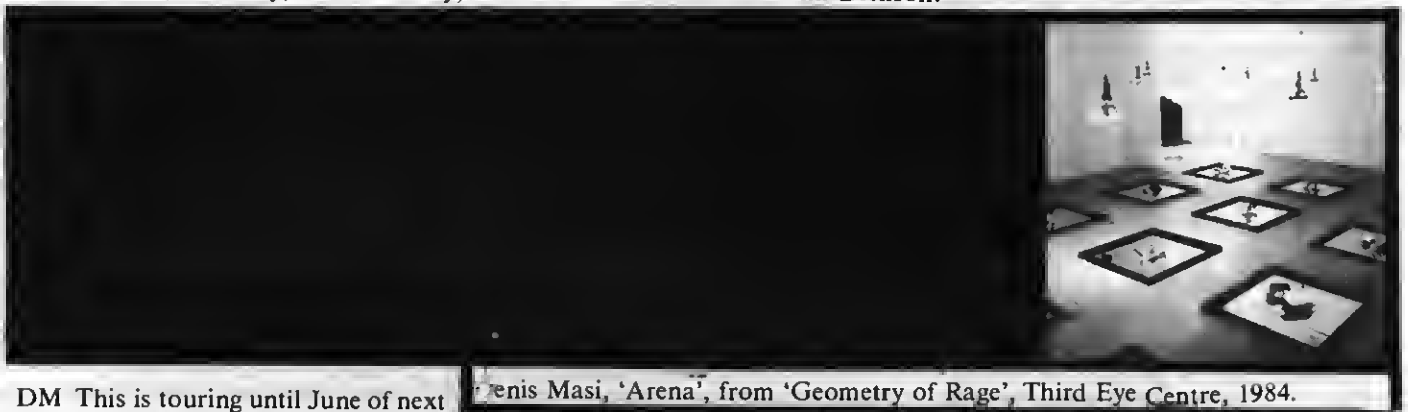
Subsidised by the Scottish Arts Council

# DENIS MASI

THE WORK OF Denis Masi has incorporated divergent media over the past ten years from performance, film and video, to collaborations with theatre companies (as in 'Parasite Structures' with Hidden Grin in '83/'84) to his theatrical installations for which he is more widely known and through which his ideas, arguably, find their strongest volume. Two of these – 'Shed' and 'Arena' – were included in the Geometry of Rage exhibition seen in 1984 at Glasgow's Third Eye Centre. That show, which included the work of Michael Sandle and Deanna Petherbridge, was a strong polemical presentation which speculated on the intermingling themes of Power, War and Patriotism. The resonance of that exhibition was recently reinforced, if not surpassed, by two new installation works by Masi also at the Third Eye Centre, called 'Prompt' and 'Shrine', the latter having references to his residency at the Imperial War Museum in 1984 (a position later occupied by Terry Atkinson and, currently, Stuart Brisley).

It might be claimed that Masi belongs to that tendency amongst contemporary artists whose work has been informed by new languages through conceptualism, video and performance, and applying this to critical themes which are pertinent to our times. In a paper delivered to the 'Post?Modern?Ism' conference which took place at the Institute of Contemporary Arts five years ago in 1982 (versions printed in Arts Monthly No. 62, 1983), the writer and critic John Roberts categorised Masi alongside Susan Hiller and Stuart Brisley as being characteristic of a 'critical postmodernism' in extended media. He based his choice on what he saw as postmodernist issues inherent in his work: theatre, language and politics.

In this interview, Masi talks about the new works in his recent touring exhibition, which is currently on show in Preston, then travels to Derry, Gateshead, London and Southampton. Interviewed by Alan Robertson and Malcolm Dickson.



Denis Masi, 'Arena', from 'Geometry of Rage', Third Eye Centre, 1984.

**DM** This is touring until June of next year, so I'm going to be living with this thing for a long time, and I haven't been able to digest the work myself. I've been living with the concept of this work in the form of 2-D drawings and the content for 10 years, in one case, 7 in the other. I've only finished it this weekend and seen the physical piece there 'in situ' in the right context. I've not had a chance to think about it myself. There is a long gap, that's part of my own practice, that I take a long time to gestate things anyway... I'm making last minute changes all the time. That's not an excuse, it's just a comment.

**AR** So when you've actually got the thing you need another period of time to take it all in for itself?

**DM** I've got to think about it a little bit more... As far as 'Prompt' is concerned, it was a practical problem. I had to have the finance to produce the floor, which was cast aluminium tiles, and until that time came the piece wasn't complete. As far as gestating it, it was finished in my mind seven years ago in 1980, whereas this one has been changing all through the process from 1984 to 1987. The dating is quite complicated. With 'Prompt' it goes from 1977 to 1987, from the time I got the idea to the time I did the first

notational drawings, to the point when it was actually finished which is this year.

**AR** Has there been a constant refinement since then?

**DM** No...the last refinements were probably done in 1980 when I did the clay floor, cast it into plaster and then stored the plaster floor away until such a time that I could take it to the aluminium casters...then I resurrect those tiles and have them cast in aluminium, then set the thing up for the catalogue photographs and see it for the first time. I didn't have to make too many adjustments on that one. It belongs to the early part of my installation work where everything is broken down into a very clear-cut dialectic where you have one thing here and one thing there, you have the entry position, which is the human understood, the empty chair...and you have the possibility for the public to transmit themselves, either physically or mentally into that...identifying rather, with this or that position. Very straightforward, very clear... So, that was no problem. But with this new piece ('Shrine') – which is the latest thing I've actually completed in terms of actual gestation time – it's very much more complicated. It's taking on

different notions and issues and it's also getting away from the stuffed animal bit which is what I'm gently trying to do, though not purposely. I'm try to come back to the human form and to go away from the absence bit, although I know that the absence is more interesting than the physical manifestation of a person or in using a person.

**AR** You're actually hinting at the human element by the work being a shrine, that element is almost actually there – you've corrected a human aspect to it.

**DM** The steps do that, or the human understood already addresses a public... But I think the main thing is that I see myself as a kind of classical sculptor who makes an object, places that object that has to be walked around and through, perhaps. But I want to bring into that some other elements. I want to expand that sculptural notion which is why I use real time elements and why I have in the past. I can't sit in this cafe or go out into that street, walk around and then come back and do some other kind of activity in my studio, because all of that is influencing me, and all of that is more exciting than what I'm doing in the studio anyway.

**MD** You use the whole gallery space to create an 'atmospheric environment'. Deanna Petherbridge, in her catalogue essay, uses the analogy between what you do and what a film director does, by bringing together different things, and because your ideas are 'multi-levelled and time-based'. Could you elaborate on that time-based aspect?

**DM** Yes, it's just what I've said about going outside and that being more interesting than anything that happens in the studio – it's all about that. I'm trying to be an artist, how do I come to terms with that? That's one aspect. So if we put that aside but keep it in mind – I go to an exhibition and see people looking at paintings. If you actually sit there with a stop watch you might find the concentration level for looking at one work of art might range between 10 and 30 seconds on average... I'm not trying to make communication with someone but I am trying to make contact, which is slightly different. How can I make contact with that pace level. It's just too quick! So I had to set up some other strategy, which was to say that if I could hold that person for just a little bit longer they might start to think about this work in another way, then I might be half way there to making some sort of contact. I felt the only way to do that was to create a theatrical environment in a context that wasn't normally the case. When people come into galleries they usually have a preconceived idea of what they know about art and what they are

expecting to see anyway. So then you present to them a theatrical situation and you've got the first punch in, if you like, you hold them for that second.

Then maybe if you add to that some other elements that they wouldn't expect to find there, you might be able to hold them for that little bit longer where they might start thinking about what they are looking at. That was the basic strategy. That comes into this other concept of saying what's outside and why is that more exciting than this activity I do in the studio, which might be carving or modelling, drawing or painting? It's about the context and saying 'I live today, these certain things happen today and somehow I have to bring that into the practice of this work and that is using technology in some way'. But technology is always at the back of the mind, because I'm a sculptor and a sculptor does certain things – he makes objects. Okay, so these objects happen to be environments and they happen to have this theatrical element to them but it doesn't change them from being sculpture, in my view.

**MD** What you're saying is that these works require a longer time-base for our thinking regarding this type of art...

**DM** I'm trying to expand the notion of sculpture...you can walk around it... If you look at 'Shrine', it could be any scale. Its size doesn't make any difference to it. It makes a difference to how it is read, it doesn't make any difference to what it is, it's still an

object, like a piece of architecture.

**AR** The time-base with your work rests more with the viewer, whereas working with video the time-base is with the actual maker who is constructing the time. You are trying to put your ideas across, through to the viewer and hold them rather than the other way round.

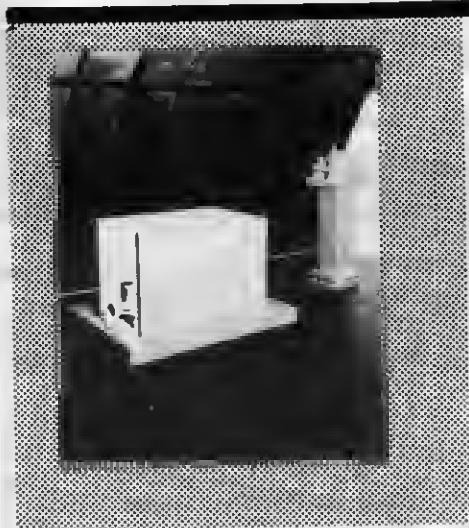
**DM** The time-base is a very small element, but it's a crucial one. In 'Prompt', the light forms the architecture of the work. Without the lighting it becomes something else. When you see it with the bright lights, it has a grey monochromatic, institutional feel about it. It has a certain interesting look about it because it's more sculptural. When you put on the theatrical lighting it takes on another kind of volume.

**AR** When the lights went on after the private view yesterday, the work lost its meaning...

**DM** It de-fused it. The other aspect of that is that when you have someone in a darkened environment, they then become less exposed to the person standing right next to them, they become more internalised, I think, and they can actually do something with it. When you're in the open you are always competing with the person standing next to you, or conscious of that other person. When it's a dark environment you feel much more private about the situation, or you might be more disturbed by it. So if we come back to what I was saying yesterday about not making statements but making suggestions and that the formulation of the work is only completed by the viewer – which is obvious in any kind of visual art activity – it becomes much more pertinent when the situation is much more ambiguous, when it is almost, but not quite, open. I initiate the process, but I don't complete it and I don't have any responsibility for the completion. My part is to initiate a suggestion. It's up to the viewer to bring his own experience to that and to make his own reading. Yesterday, we came into a confusing aspect on that level and I think it's basically because if everyone read each work on one level then I'm failing totally in what I want to do. If the majority of people read it differently, then I feel quite successful.

**AR** It's quite interesting, like an algebraic thing you're working out in that you have all the elements to the equation there, but you say there's not one answer to it, you leave it up to the viewer to work out, unlike using the same elements of the equation to come up with the same answer every time. It's just how you build the equation up with the techniques you use.

**DM** That's right. When I started



Eye Centre, 1987.

Denis Mori, 'Shrine', installation detail, courtesy Third Eye Centre, 1987.



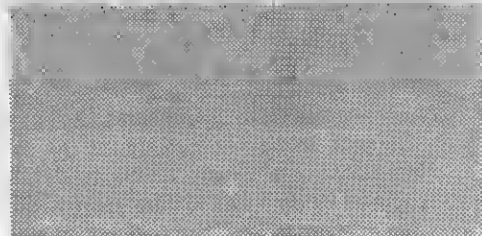
doing this kind of work – which probably happened around 1970 – I had this notion I wanted to reach a broad public, and I still carry this notion with me. That's why I started to build large installations. That was a kind of synthesis that went along with the theatrical bit, to hold them, how to bring in outside elements, all of that synthesized at the same time. The notion of reaching a broad public was public spaces – you're not actually directing what you do to a narrowed elitist coterie. You're trying to broaden out, but that broadening out is narrowed already because the people who walk through these doors already have an interest...and 'the man in the street' doesn't give a damn anyway, ultimately...

**MD** Do you think it is necessary to explain the meaning of artworks? What do you see the role of the critic regarding your work? What sort of views do you have on that since you're the initiator, the public is the receiver, and the critic might be seen as the 'helper'?

**DM** I think the critic can be a helper, it's a filter. It's a difficult one, because the filter ends up defining parameters and defusing certain things so that people only read it in that way and I'm not too keen on that. They (the critics) are just other people interpreting it and what they do is put their responses forward, but they have a certain kind of credibility, you see, they're journalists, or writers, and they have a vehicle through which to manifest their ideas. They have some kind of power, so in that sense they are influencing people. What I would prefer is getting a general access. When Deanna (Petherbridge, who wrote one of the catalogue essays to the show) and I talk about this article she wants to write and she starts putting forward all these things and I say to her "this is not what I intended... I'm not interested in that bit, but if that's the way you want to interpret it, then fine. You write that, because I'm not going to edit anything you write". The same goes for Mike Archer (who wrote the other catalogue essay). I'm not the kind of artist who will come wading in and say "no, no, no, that's not what I said, let's get it absolutely right", because then I don't give them any space. I approach that issue by asking "are you interested in what I do? Yes? Let's have a chat. Would you like to write something for the catalogue? Yes? Then whatever you write, that's what goes in". I can't control all those things anyway and it's not right that I should. So to go back to the question about the critic – all I'm trying to do is my own work, I put it out there and



Denis Masi, 'Prompt', installation detail,



whatever happens to it, then that's when it has ended. It either gets torn apart, or...

**AR** We're interested in the ideas around the area, we may have seemed provocative yesterday.

**DM** I don't mind that, it's just that I'm not interested in attack any more, because if you really want to do something, as was said yesterday, then you go into politics. But once you go into politics you go into another area of corruption. I hold this...it's interesting but is it art? It pleases me to do it, it's good, it's therapeutic, it keeps me off the streets, it gives other people jobs. What can you say to these sorts of things. I don't know what you can do with it. I don't want that to sound as if it's a cop-out – I don't opt out, because I'm working very hard, every day, 365 days a year to that activity and I believe in it. I believe in solid, traditional artistic values, painting, sculpture, all the rest of it, and I don't see what I'm doing as being very different. I hope more people can get access to it, but perhaps they're not, maybe I'm fooling myself.

**AR** Is the little cabin a part of the show?

**DM** Yes. I've got two elements which are missing from the exhibition, because I couldn't finance them, one being strobe lights in 'Prompt' on a time-base thing so that in every half hour the theatrical lights would switch off and the strobe would come on in 3 shots, with black pauses in between, then the coloured lights would come back on... My theory was, depending on whether someone was moving or not, that it would help animate the dog. Another thing is that if you stand and look at the dog for long enough and then look away to the wall you get a double image and that was my other way of bringing animation on the dog. Not that I wanted the dog to move, but on that other level...

**AR** To correct it's own time-base again...

**DM** Yes. The other element which is missing is the scanner on the video camera so that camera is supposed to be moving, gently all the time, for two reasons – when you walk in and look there you may not see it straight away, but you would soon become aware of this thing moving. My feeling is that it would cause people to feel uncomfortable about being watched... They're being watched by the artwork. But then if you go into the cubicle, you might suddenly realise that you're able to see what the camera is looking at, and it's looking at the viewers, and you, the viewer, are looking at your fellow viewers. So you become this ultra voyeur. So you assume the position of, perhaps, Big Brother, or this Other personality somewhere who

is in control.

AR It's quite sinister having this surveillance camera on the thing as a Shrine itself, it's like surveying the dead, quite a sinister double-play.

DM I'm going to describe 'Shrine' for you. You approach from this angle (Masi gestures, using the dictaphone as a model for 'Shrine'), you have an upside down flagpole which, for me, relates to the old funeral symbolism of the upside down torch which is the extinguishing of life. If you turn a flagpole upside down you are extinguishing patriotism in a sense.

AR It's a white flag so when it's up it's surrender, so the argument is that when it's upside down it becomes a symbol of aggression.

DM It's feasible because it has so many levels. Okay, so I'm not saying one thing, I'm making suggestions. All I'm telling you two now is what initiated my idea. I did a transference from the sort of funeral symbolism if you like to something else. For me, it was a direct jump. It was an obvious move, the notion could work. In any case, the notion of an upside down flagpole is interesting, I think. Now what we do with that is the next step. What do you do with it and what should the flag be? The flag was originally going to be a new piece of cloth which they have in America which has electrodes which run through it so it glows. I couldn't get the cloth so I had to do something else. So I got a white flag, but a white flag has meaning to it. So it's not 'anti' what I was thinking anyway. It's a kind of 'releasing'. Surrender is to release and Steve's poem at the point which says 'Cold steel which goes in. release me. release me.' If you analyse his poems he's just stringing words together which have all kinds of other meanings, it's very similar to what I'm doing - you take elements from here and other elements from there, and put it together and you have a body which can then be interpreted in many different ways. So you have the upside down flagpole - the flag is white, it's silk, and it has stitching on it which has the George's Cross and St. Andrew's Cross on it which you can't see, but it's there. I'm not going to say anymore about that, you've got to make something of that, that's your job... I don't want anything that's passive. I want the viewer to do something. When you go and look at a painting and stand there for 10 seconds, that's a passive activity. How many people actually sit down and look at it? Maybe I'm being arrogant, maybe lots of people do.

DM So I'm trying to set up situations where people have to make an effort. They're either going to say "this is shit", like in the comments book where it says "How can anyone kill a dog for this shit?" - that's a response. That's successful, for all the wrong reasons. They've come away from this exhibition and they've had to consider it. That's the first step, maybe that person will come back, I hope.

MD The power of the artwork lies in its imaginative capacities to provoke associations...

AR If people do come back it has had the power to draw them back in, so the power of that work has convinced that person to spread a negative word about the whole thing. So in its most static sense, in a gallery, it still emanates something.

DM Hopefully. That's why I say to you, ten people, ten different responses, that's a success. The only thing which is a failure is when you're ignored, where obviously something is wrong, you're doing the wrong thing... But, as I was saying...you come in, you have the upside down flagpole, you have these objects lying there, you have an open side which gives you another kind of access, you have two open ends. When you circulate the whole of that sculpture, you see it from five different views. When you go round the back side, you see what is a kind of street light - a halogen light up on a pole. You see a closed architectural structure, a scorched bunker. That also becomes interesting because the whole of that object could have been closed off with copper plated steel, like a bunker, and then it would have another kind of meaning. That's one element of its possible layered meaning. But it's embodied also into what it is, because it's as shrine, but a shrine to what? What can you make shrines to today? Can you actually build shrines? It is something to do with what the subject matter is? Can we build a shrine to the fact that patriotism is a load of crap?

AR It seems a light argument to put forward.

DM But if you think about it, monuments are an established art form and they are an established establish/ment art form...and it has a lot to do with things like when they troop the colour, march down Whitehall to the Cenotaph. All that is an art form which is more importance than painting or sculpture. It has more importance. Having been at the Imperial War Museum and spending all that time defending it as an historical institution, trying to defuse the attitude that that institution just represented the concept of war,

which it doesn't. It's just an historical institution. Most of the people who work there are pacifists anyway. It's much more complex as an institution than the objects which are there, like the guns, planes etc. There's an archive of personal letters - it's a living shrine in itself.

AR It doesn't help being called the Imperial War Museum.

DM When it was constituted by an Act of Parliament this was an Empire, that's history isn't it... We now have new, different notions about all of that, our notions have changed...

...When I went to the IWM that synthesised my ideas for a work about a shrine, a monument. I was playing with the ritual thing, but I couldn't actually pull it together. This work is a sort of response to having been in that institution. It's also dealing with this patriotism thing, certain other kinds of notions. You have one group of people here who have one set of ideals and you have another group of people here who have an opposite set of ideals. The point is that the two functions are equitable, they just have different sets of ideas...and how one shifts from one to the other and what's in the middle, so what does it result in? We have something here which, at one look, could be a monument, at another look is actually watching you, another look is a kind of scorched bunker and it could go on from that - there's a public address system coming across and there are notions about what that sound means to people or could mean to people. Then there's the content of what's actually coming across - a poem written by a man and generated after seeing a photograph of a British soldier on lookout duty in Northern Ireland looking out over a Winter landscape. If you sit down and listen to it and read the text with it, listen to his intonation and see the polemics that he's drawing in through that and how that might relate to the object. The content of that condensed takes two forms - one is Northern Ireland, the other is racialism. That's what's laced through it. You have to concentrate to pick it up, but it is there. There are segments that come out which are statements in themselves, they relate to the work, or they can stand on their own. It's up to you to go through it, maybe you'll make the same relations as I do. I find it extremely beautiful poetry as well, because it's charged, it's politicised poetry...

...I don't want to have to speak too much about the work, because then I put too many ideas in your heads. I want the public to do that. That's why I find it difficult to talk too much about the work and I've already talked too much.

# Redundant Aesthetics and THE CULT OF FAILURE

GLASGOW SCHOOL of Art is world famous. Word has it that if you want to be a painter, then GSA is the place to go. Rumour has it that it has been the 'rigorous teaching', incessant life drawing, devotion to studio disciplines and a renewed sense of history that has led to current claims about a 'new Scottish Renaissance'. With some 'Glasgow Painters' ridiculously inflated positions and prices malleable to the repackaging of Glasgow, it's no surprise that the emphasis was on the attractiveness of the product at the degree shows last June, with those managing to spend a lot of presentation (nice frames, business cards etc.) getting good marks in return. Despite all the media ballyhoo, GSA drawing and painting department is still the backward institution it ever was. Tradition is still very much the order of the day, with no outside stimulus (community interaction) or outside necessities (good tutoring, a varied and stimulating list of visiting lecturers) available to change the situation to any degree that might merit a little creative determination on the authorities' part.

A few years ago when the new identity of Glasgow as a doting Mr Man was but a twinkle in the city fathers' eyes, the best painters to come out of GSA were the ones who refused to accept the old standard notions about painting and chose their own paths, often to the indifference of the teaching staff (when they were around not to bother). Ken Currie, who graduated in 1982, was a staunch socialist whilst a student and this led to his condemnation of the art school establishment and its traditions for their numbing conservatism and complete avoidance of political and social issues which he believed should be fuelling a valid contemporary painting practice. Stylistically influenced by Leger and the Mexican Muralists, he held up his rejuvenated socialist realism against the 'formless masses of paint' of mid-generation Glasgow artists and the opportunism of his contemporaries in accommodating international fashions. Currie's consistent theme has been the history of Clydeside, mainly focussed on the struggles and defeats of the shipbuilding industry and his uncomfortable inclusion in the New

Image show of two years ago and more recently at the multi-national Shell sponsored 'Vigorous Imagination' show at the National Gallery of Modern Art (a thoroughly distasteful spectacle) has led to a rather tenuous link with the art world, though this is counterbalanced at the end of the day by a commitment to public mural projects which might, at their most active, bring to public attention the lost struggles of the people's past (such as the Rent Strikes of 1915). Peter Thomson dispensed with reference points altogether and through an erratic use of images and ideas within his work built a terrifying sense of alienation in contemporary society and a disintegration of values. His early work combined the painterly manner of Chagal with the mental free wheeling of Kiff (maybe!) into a nihilistic vision of urban living. With Gordon Muir, the disintegration of values corresponded to the break-up of imagery in his canvas in a graffiti, psychedelic vibrancy clashing with images from the conundrum of late-capitalist consumer culture, post punk music, drugs, the reality of life in the housing schemes. Both Muir and Thomson deal with the abrasive side of urban living, their art is unnerving, humorous, repulsive and clearly not a panacea for the base from which they emanate. In the context of Glasgow art, their acute and distorted observations seem much more ground in a tangible reality that you can feel, have lived, and do experience. In this respect, they have no time nor any concern for illustrating or in

romanticising deprivation, alienation, the downtrodden or the misfortunate, which is a position diametrically opposed to that of a painter such as Peter Howson.

To romanticise or fictionalise the downtrodden is to avoid painful realities; real agony and poverty exist beneath the glossy surface of the new Glasgow image and one sees only too clearly why Howson, for example, has made his name crafting a patronising view of Glasgow 'lowlife' for rich art and business types. It's one thing to claim that class divisions don't exist any more from the comfortable distance of the armchair, and quite another to see the condition of your life suffer under an almost incomprehensible ideology based on the segregation of class, culture and wealth. As far as painting goes, the real challenge lies in making art political as opposed to making political art. With Thomson and Muir, their art is an expression of their histories, and is a result of lived experience of the present day. That that experience is problematic in psycho-social terms and not a concern of analysis in visual terms, the work of these painters is unavoidably irrational in its expression. More provocative since the nihilism of their positions are the most radical of all.

It may be tentatively suggested that it is only the last few years that the presence of women painters has been felt, by the establishment on the one hand attempting to give them a place in the establishment way of things, and by women on the other conscious of their gender's oppressive role within the male-run establishment. Both Helen Flockhart and Anne Elliot used as a starting point elements of self-revulsion of a bodily and psychological nature directed against the inherent sexism in social relations. Whilst this may have faltered in its incapacity to identify oppression in the totality, it was in contrast to the redundant aesthetics of 'studio life' and its nature was determined by being in the position of the 'Other'.

The lack of stimulating teaching and a critical foundation for practice has led painting to be a medium for disorientated visions and personalities. Angst-ridden imagery, or that which has some element of personal despair in its expression can too easily



Gordon Muir, 'Nightmare Gadget', 1987, oil on canvas.



Sketches by Peter Thomson, all untitled, 1987.



result in artistic (and psychological) disintegration when left in isolation with no critical discussion through journals, through artist groupings and interaction with others. This situation can be seen in the painting department in GSA. Despite the claim made by Herald critic Claire Henry that "there are artists and there are woman artists", this fails to hold any ground when it is defined according to what already exists in establishment terms. It would be encouraging to see a counter-position indentified by women artists themselves through informed knowledge of their position which is strong enough to refuse relegation to the second division, and clarified enough not to cut itself off from other dissatisfied elements on the artistic terrain.

This problem is a class one and the segregation of sex and class go hand in hand, the denial of one history (women's) is the denial of the other (a strong working class voice?). Painters who use some aspect of personal suffering (Flockhart, Elliot) and those who use an alienation from the values



Drawings by Anne Elliot, all untitled, 1984.



Helen Flockhart, oil on canvas, 1985



Helen Flockhart, oil on canvas, 1985

of consumer society (Muir, Thomson) are more likely to seek ways of superceding this deadlock through active political change in the world. A more radical sensibility will be

concerned with the communicative attributes of the art in question. This then is in stark contrast to the nostalgic reverie of New Image and also begins to trace a form of

expression discernibly motivated by impulses unconnected with Celtic or mythical symbolism.

It is, also, a far cry from the realities of student life in the painting department at GSA where an ill-informed, uncritical, badly-taught course continues to the detriment of a diverse, energetic, and finally pertinent painting tradition in Scotland.

In the political climate of the present, fine art departments will have to justify their creative role beyond career moulding or pampering to an upwardly mobile market. The bite mark left in the neck of Scottish art by the market success of some recent painters has left a tranquilising effect on almost all involved with visual arts in Scotland. This says as much about the lack of critical and imaginative depth in Scottish art as it does about some people's inability to recognise and resist the influence of the new capitalist forces invading our lives. But who ever said artists, curators, critics and art school establishments were ever in the position of fostering oppositional attitudes to encroaching right-wing ideologies? 'Glasgow Smiles Bitter?'

© Malcolm Dickson, August '87.

Malcolm Dickson left art school at the same time as Flockhart, Elliot, Muir and Thomson (1984).

He makes no apologies for knowing these artists personally.



Gordon Muir 'God' 1987



# THE GREAT DIVIDE & THE VIGOROUS IMAGINATION

LIKE A GOOD advertising campaign everything about this show seemed expertly and professionally orchestrated and manipulated. The formula was right – take a number of high profile, sought after Artist's – add to this a number of relative unknowns, a few whizz kids fresh from graduation and token representation of women.

Combine all of these with the clout of several 'high profile' reviewers, possibly the best conventional art venue in Scotland and a clinical 'media hype' and there you have it – a major movement in contemporary art. A veritable Renaissance.

As for the work – it stands and falls on its own merits, ranging as it does from the competent, crafted and glossy to the inept, dull and contrived – something which seems to have failed to emerge from the endless reviews, mutual back-slapping and general propaganda which surrounded the event.

The work itself has been dealt with in great depth in just about any rag you care to mention and unless you've been living on Mars for the past month you've more than likely been exposed to the art, or more likely the 'artist' or 'critic' in everything from The Face to the Glasgow Herald. A comment to be made here is that nowhere will you find articles which address themselves to the implications that such a show has for other less high profile artists, i.e. those that either didn't get selected or those working outside the 'brief' for the creation of such a show. In short the majority – rather than the chosen few.

What we're witnessing without doubt is the emergence and creation of a cult/spirit of free enterprise, where the 'great divide' is not a question of wealth and poverty or north and south, but one in which a chosen few are being elevated to positions of media stars, yuppie pets and, most importantly, viable investments.

In such a situation as exists culturally at the moment and in the light of the current calculated and sinister manipulation of the media, isn't it about time that artists were seen to make a stand against the tactics of such a media circus?

Such opposition, both in criticism, work itself and in the exposure it receives is crucial at a stage both politically and culturally as exists now. In an age pre-occupied with 'professional image', oppositional

tactics and views are crucial if we are not to be swallowed up the prevalent 'designer' ideology of the new right or OD'd on an excess of style.

In the context of this show there's no doubt these prevalent attitudes have been at work – which in true monetarist style takes the financially viable and throws the rest on the cultural garbage heap (the other side of the great divide).

Maybe I'm wrong – but then if you believe what you read rather than what you with regards to this show it's the perfect time to be a Scottish(ish) Artist.

Predictably and to an extent justifiably most of the work on show is painting (dealt with in great depth in just about every Art column and magazine imaginable). Sculpture is given its usual under-representation but what is of particular interest is the inclusion of several works termed installations.

In their own right they reveal much about the show itself and its pre-occupations.

To assess these works as Installations is a conceit both on the part of the selectors and the artists themselves.

Installation in its most effective form can be seen to go somewhat towards breaking boundaries and blurring definitions. Without going

too far into the theory and practice on installation, a fair assessment is that the best installation is either challenging in its form and use of medium, site specific or extends the potential for creative activity into tactile yet temporal areas. To some extent the installations within this show meet these criteria, where they fail is in the fact that most of the best installation work tends to reveal something about the space/time and situation in which they are placed and takes the potential for art making beyond object making, and manufacturing or alternative interior decorating – which all the works under discussion are guilty of, ranging as they do from Kate Whitford's Rothko-style interior 'paint job' to a number of large scale photos of carefully constructed three dimensional sets by Calum Calvin and Ron O'Donnell.

On all accounts, with the exception of David Mach (who incidentally calls his work sculpture), the work termed installation fell short of either stretching or challenging boundaries.

In all cases the need/obligation to produce a material and two dimensional image seems to be the key element in making this area of work acceptable to the art market, critics and reviewers alike – many of whom are either unsympathetic, unfamiliar,

## THE VIGOROUS IMAGINATION: NEW SCOTTISH ART.

Belford Road, Edinburgh 031-556 8921


9 August – 25 October Admission Free

10-6 Mon-Sat 11-6 Sun (Festival) 10-5 Mon-Sat 2-5 Sun (Otherwise)

This major exhibition features new work from 17 young Scots, including painters Campbell, Wiszniewski, Howson and

Currie and photographers Colvin and O'Donnell.

One of the most ambitious projects staged in Scotland this decade, the exhibition includes specially commissioned installations by David Mach, Kate Whiteford and Sam Ainsley.

Sponsored by  
SHELL UK LIMITED   
free parking, café



SCOTTISH

NATIONAL GALLERY

OF MODERN ART

uninterested or, most significantly, insecure when dealing with such work.

The materials used are seemingly used for their craft, colour, decoration and gloss values – embodying very little cultural relevance (see the materials used by artists working in installation such as Art in Ruins as an example). The exception being David Mach whose work is both challenging in terms of its intimidating and epic visual presence and in the material used in its construction – but then this is called sculpture so let's not get into that one...

A key element in much installation work has invariably been political – political in the sense that such a form and practice represents a way for artists to work in a way which both undermines the Art Object syndrome and allows the gallery to be used in such a way that its role becomes more that of cultural focal point.

Although one work in particular addresses itself to political/cultural issues, namely the 'Great Divide' by Ron O'Donnell, its final form despite the arguments of the Artist both detracts and negates from the subject it addresses. Sadly, as a 'big' photograph (rather than a 'big' painting) it detracts through its glossiness and deliberately prevents the viewer from coming to terms with the work's important

cultural comment.

A parallel here is with advertising's use of extremely glossy images of urban shit heaps etc. to sell everything from pop stars to lager. The problem is the implication of a work such as the 'Great Divide' aren't that pleasant – yet like advertising we see a kind of all-pervading 'designer realism' and niceness – when in fact artists should be looking behind the nation's advertising billboards rather than trying to mimic them.

In short this work falls short on all levels – the failure to use the real potential of installation in this – as in all the other works in this group is evident – why does the 'Great Divide' in this show seem so nice, so glossy and stylised (here I'm referring to the whole show). The fact is the division isn't just about haves and have nots – what surely validates an artist's view is their position within a cultural hierarchy. In the case of this show this position is questionable.

Overall, there seems to be a failure on the part of all the Artist's involved in presenting 'Installation' in this show to really use the form to some sort of cultural or political advantage. The primary concern in producing some kind of commodity – a two dimensional image acceptable to the art market is self evident – and in

keeping with the remainder of the show itself.

In the light of the obvious significance and influence that this show is likely to have over those currently trying to work as Artists in a climate of repressive tolerance (and under considerable economic hardship) a key consideration has to be: what comes next?

Is it really as clear cut as some reviewers would have us believe, i.e. 'This is the best Art in the World'. If it's that clear cut, then one must ask what these artists will be doing in five, ten years time (bearing in mind their average age is 28).

Will their work stand the acid test of time, or simply disappear into archives and vaults of museums and collectors until the next best art in the world comes along?

With regards to those Artists represented and show installations, how many will be brave enough to either use the form more fully or change direction (to their financial detriment), moving across into other ways of making such work, using performance, installation and even video – but then when you're dealing with the best art in the world – who's to suggest changes?

© David O'Vary

## Rē RECORDS QUARTERLY MAGAZINE

combines a 64 page A4 magazine and 12" LP, providing a unique insight into the workings of experimental, radical and progressive popular musics from all over the world. Each issue offers a selection of recordings - concert extracts, commissioned works, archive material, items introducing 'unknowns' - and a wide variety of articles (practical, theoretical, and critical), written chiefly by musicians. Rē Records Quarterly Magazine exists to inform and nourish a community of shared expertise: to engage with music, we need to be informed, - to live through such an expertise rather than simply to operate a consumer taste.

**Vol.2. No.2** is now available, featuring articles by Eddie Prévoist (on AMM), Chris Cutler (Skill, Punk, the New Wave, Heavy Metal), and Michael Gerzon (on the mixdown process). The disc features music from Mexico, Yugoslavia, Canada & USA. Price: £7.50 per issue (printed magazine only £2.50. Disc only £5.00). £28.00 for four issues, which can include back issues. Subscriptions come in a numbered edition, each with a special extra item. For full details write to Recommended Records, 387 Wandsworth Road, London SW8.

# **RHETORICAL QUESTIONS**

**When is art political?**

**Why is political art political?**

**When is political art not political?**

**Which art is not political?**

**Is the art in the Royal Scottish Academy political?**

**Is David Donaldson's portrait of Margaret Thatcher political?**

**Who is the most political artist in Scotland?**

**Who is the most political artist of all time?**

**Does the nature of political art extend beyond 'representation'?**

**Why weren't the Glasgow Boys political artists?**

**Was George Wylie's 'Straw Locomotive' political art?**

**Is the nuclear bomb political art?**

**Why has the political art of Disney had more effect on world history than the political art of Eisenstein?**

**If you had to choose between official German political art c. 1937 and official Russian political art of the same period, which would you prefer? And why?**

**The term 'political art' seems to have lost its potency and meaning. Give reasons for this.**

**ART in RUINS**

**Stuart McKenzie**

***EventSpace***

**denis masi**

THE NATIONAL ARTISTS ASSOCIATION

**VIGOROUS IMAGINATION**

IAN HAMILTON FINLAY

**PLAGIARISM**

G.S.A. Painting